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SCIENCES

# Gender and Sexual Politics in Europe

## Queer festivals and their counterpublics

Konstantinos Eleftheriadis

Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to  
obtaining the degree of Doctor of Political and Social Sciences  
of the European University Institute

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European University Institute  
**Department of Political and Social Sciences**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1. Introduction	8
1.1 Overview	8
1.2 The anti-identity narrative of queer politics: How does it mobilize?	11
1.3 Dimensions of analysis	29
 Chapter 2. Studying counterpublics across the European space: a multi-sited ethnography of queer festivals	 38
2.1. Introduction	38
2.2 Theorizing the methodology: Multi-sited ethnography	39
2.3 Methods of research	49
 Chapter 3. Contextualizing the field	 59
3.1. Introduction	59
3.2 Historical Genealogies	57
3.3 Case studies: Six queer festivals in five European capitals	70
3.4 Subordinate discourses rather than positions: Sociological indications of queer festivals	77
3.5 Conclusion	80
 Chapter 4. The organization of queer festivals: Horizontality, Do-It-Yourself and Counterpublics	 83
4.1 Introduction	81
4.2 Organization on prefigurative spaces	85
4.3 Space, horizontal DIY festivals and the construction of queer counterpublics	87
4.4 What is queer with the organization? Negotiating the differences	100
4.5 Conclusion	107
 Chapter 5. What is ‘queer’ about queer festivals? Identity-building through narrative practices and collective actions	 114
5.1 Introduction	114
5.2 Queer and Identity: Theoretical insights	116
5.3 Addressing identity issues in practice	124
5.4 Conclusion	153

Chapter 6. Queering Transnationalism	159
6.1 Introduction	159
6.2 Moving transnationalism one step forward: A theoretical overview	161
6.3 Survey results	166
6.4 Building transnational counterpublics through practices	167
6.5 Conclusion	184
 Chapter 7. ‘Not yet queer enough’: Constructing identity by addressing culture	188
7.1 Introduction	188
7.2 Theoretical Overview	190
7.3 Speaking ‘queer’	192
7.4 ‘Mmmm... Vegan is so tasty’: Food practices	206
7.5 ‘I am trash, because I like it’: Corporeal expressivity	218
7.6 Conclusion	225
 Chapter 8. Conclusion: What’s next: Counterpublics and Democracy	231
8.1 The theoretical journey	231
8.2 Major findings and perspectives for research	233
8.3 The festivals as arenas in which counterpublics emerge	242
8.4 Queer counterpublics, social movements and democracy	245

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## Chapter 1.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Queer festivals in Europe: The construction of transnational counterpublics

##### 1.1. Overview

‘The LGBT movement is often confined to the sacrosanct trench of gay marriage and adoption. We must try to imagine new ways of progress, new practices, new insights’.<sup>1</sup> This is how the festival ‘Da Mieli a Queer’ in Rome started in a spring day of April 2013. QueerLab, a grassroots queer group, together with the association Mario Mieli and the squat-theatre Teatro Valle, organized a four-day event in order to ‘experiment in the words, in the body experience, in poetics, in the imaginary’. Two months later, in a more northerly part of Europe, another queer festival was starting: the Queeristan festival of Amsterdam. ‘The manipulation of gay rights has made it possible to actively support blatantly racist, classist, sexist and xenophobic policies. [...] Let’s abandon sexuality as a personal identity that just defines a lifestyle. We are angry, we are pissed off, dissatisfied, indignados’<sup>2</sup>. With these words spreading inside the space, the three-day event would get under way within the squat area of the city.

Queer festivals make up a part of the legacy of queer activism, as it has developed in North America and Europe from the late 80s onwards. Their political discourse is based on a confrontational style of address, while their content is largely inspired by poststructuralist views of identities as a tool through which power operates (Butler, 1990).

However, the ‘constant deconstruction of identities... undermine[s] the claims to strength and unity of their own rights movement’ (Jasper et al., forthcoming: 29). The anti-identity

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<sup>1</sup> Brochure of the Da Mieli a Queer Festival, Rome 2013 (In Italian. Translation mine)

<sup>2</sup> Brochure of the Queeristan Festival, Amsterdam 2013

paradox (Jasper et al., forthcoming; or the 'queer dilemma', Gamson, 1995) entails the failure to avoid the construction of a new identity, built precisely on the same discourse it attempts to deconstruct. Thus, the following puzzle emerges: If we assume that queer politics are based on this 'anti-identity' paradox, on which kind of identity, then, can they mobilize? In other words, given that the identity they attempt to build leads to their self-destruction, how can queer politics, over time, strengthen and spread across Europe?

This puzzle or anti-identity paradox, upon which the queer movement is constructed, is analysed by means of an ethnographic research into queer festivals which address a transnational constituency. I assume that this anti-identity paradox is not strictly the result of a rational choice, but is rather linked to the promotion and reification of a specific oppositional culture, which sustains it through time and in multiple sites across Europe. The promotion of this oppositional culture takes place within regular events, which function as arenas where specific discursive texts circulate, and a set of activist practices emerges. It is through these arenas that queer counterpublics emerge, as oppositional to the official discourses of the public sphere.

My research is situated within the discussions on alternative public spheres, sexuality and gender studies, transnational social movements and cultural sociology. By analysing the confrontational, anti-identitarian narrative of queer festivals, I will attempt to comprehend them as alternative/parallel public spheres, or 'counterpublic spheres' (Fraser, 1990), given that the conflicts of the counterpublics extend 'not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media' (Warner, 2002: 86). Therefore festivals, apart from their political orientation to shape a queer collective identity (Gamson, 1995; Taylor and Whittier, 1992), attempt to invent new discourses and practices, functioning as prefigurative spaces, with transformative imaginaries (Polletta, 1999; Olesen 2005). Therefore, the queer anti-identitarian collective identity is inextricably linked to the construction of counterpublics.

The dissertation's methodological approach consists of multi-sited ethnographic research (Marcus, 1995). I systematized the common discursive and organizational patterns I observed in six queer festivals, in five European capitals. Multiple qualitative methods are used, such as life histories, participant observation, discourse analysis and focus groups.

A challenging question that will emerge and will take shape towards the end of the dissertation is that of whether, and if so to what extent, queer counterpublics can contribute to democracy. My assumption will be that counterpublics can extend the discursive space of the 'political' (What is considered to be political or not), while at the same time they can prefigure new forms of transnational social and political organization, if we accept the view of politics as a 'struggle over which imaginary would have greater sway... form[ing] culture in the public sphere rather than only engag[ing] in rational-critical discourse' (Calhoun, 2012: 162).

#### 1. 1. 1 Structure of the chapter

I divided the introduction into two parts, in which I will focus on the object of the study, its analytical relevance and contribution to contemporary academic debates on social movements, identity formation and the politics of counterpublics.

In the first part, I will expose the argument of the dissertation. By positioning my research within the literature and the academic debates, I will introduce the puzzle and present the research question. The clarification of the question will be intertwined with the theoretical framework of the thesis. Thus I will illustrate the links between queer festivals and anti-identity narrative, through the literature on collective identities and the repertoire of actions from social movement studies. I will then concentrate on the literature on counterpublics.

The second part of the Introduction will focus on the structure of the dissertation. I will present the dimensions of analysis. I will sum up the rationale of my argument and the secondary questions that will emerge. At the end of this part, I will present in detail the specific issues that every chapter focuses on, and how they relate to the research question.

## **1. 2. The anti-identity narrative of queer politics: How does it mobilize?**

*Queer should not be understood as an identity, it should be understood in an anti-identitarian manner'*

*Queeruption mailing list's discussion. 04/06/2010*

*The foundationalist reasoning of identity politics tends to assume that an identity must first be in place in order for political interests to be elaborated and, subsequently, political action to be taken. My argument is that there need not be a 'doer behind the deed', but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed. (Butler, 1999: 181)*

### **1.2.1 Puzzle and Research question**

I started the introduction by revealing the puzzle and the research question of the thesis. How does a movement which officially refuses identities achieve a certain degree of mobilization, maintaining and even strengthening itself through time, if we take into account that the identity it attempts to build leads it to self-destruction?

The understanding of this puzzle or anti-identity paradox, upon which the queer movement is constructed, will be analysed through a very specific repertoire of action: queer festivals addressing a transnational public. I assume that the queer anti-identity discourse that these festivals mobilize is not strictly linked to a rational choice, but is rather connected to the promotion and reification of a specific counter-culture, which

helps festivals sustain themselves, through time, and in multiple sites across Europe. This counter-cultural promotion takes place within periodical events, which function as arenas where specific discursive texts circulate, and a set of cultural and organizational practices is promoted. In other words, in order to check the anti-identity paradox, I will shift the attention to how queer festivals shape alternative spheres of discourse and political practice. In other words, how queer festivals shape queer counterpublics.

### 1.2.2 Queer festivals as repertoire of collective action: Claim-making, Challenging codes and Collective identity

In 2010, at the time that I started my PhD, the number of queer festivals across Europe was expanding. Although familiar with queer politics through my political involvement, I had never participated in a queer festival before the beginning of my thesis. Through my personal investigation into their growth across the radical political scenes of Europe, a question began to form: Why a festival? What does this specific repertoire offer to the queer movement? My first assumption was that a festival aspires to give more visibility to the political claims of a movement, and help solidify the existing bonds of different networks. Similar political festivals exist already: the festivals of the Communist parties in Western European countries have already invested a lot of resources in the maintenance of this repertoire. With the Communist parties' festivals in mind, I imagined their queer counterparts as spaces in which similar political discussions would take place, combined with cultural and networking activities. Queer would just add to and revitalize the 'pre-existing palette of protest forms' (Neveu, 1996: 21, translation mine) of the repertoires of other political parties and social movements.

During my preliminary investigation, I looked more closely at their programmes. In most cases, my initial assumptions were confirmed: the events had a rich variety of activities, political and cultural discussions, collective cooking and similar bonding activities. Unlike the Communist parties' festivals, queer festivals however seemed to stress largely

their horizontal and Do-It-Yourself [DIY, from now on] structure. At the same time, sexually explicit performances, sex parties and other similar events would enrich the festivals' programmes: a promoted morale going beyond the limits of any communist party festival. What also surprised me were the commonalities all these festivals presented, both at the discursive and the organizational level: all events took place in highly politicized spaces, mostly squats, and shared a strong internationalist character. Their call-outs enthusiastically welcomed people from all over Europe and beyond, while many of them were also open to new members, to staff the organizing committees. Therefore, the festival as a repertoire of action would become the principal focus of investigation for my research question.

Social movement studies have focused intensively on collective actions of political groups. According to Della Porta and Diani, collective action refers to 'individuals sharing resources in pursuit of collective goals – i.e., goals that cannot be privatized to any of the members of the collectivity on behalf of which collective action has taken place' (2006: 19). The concentration of single collective actions in a contained space of time, rather than a series of discrete events, provides a social movement with specific dynamic (della Porta and Diani, 2006: 23). When it comes to left-wing groups, scholars tend to focus on protests and their impact on decision-makers, in order to gain popular support (Tilly, 1986) or to threaten public order (Caiani et al., 2012: 209; Taylor et al., 2009: 866).

Although protests and marches tend to monopolize the interest in social movement tactics, other forms of collective action, such as boycotts, occupations, and sit-ins can form the tactical repertoire of action of a movement. Charles Tilly has used the term 'repertoire' in order to explain the changes in the way people mobilize against governments, in order to stake their claims:

'[...] Seizure of grain, collective invasions of fields and the like became ineffective, irrelevant, obsolete. In response to the shifts of power and capital, ordinary people

invented and adopted new forms of action, creating the electoral campaign, the public meeting, the social movement, and the other elements of the newer repertoire' (1986: 396).

A repertoire always holds a sort of strategic and intentional *raison d'être*, which links it to the movement's imaginative historical legacy. At the same time, collective action occurring within a repertoire helps develop an oppositional consciousness. In other words, a repertoire is inextricably connected with the collective identity of a movement: 'Collective identity is thus crucial for the tactics of the movement, and vice versa' (Schedler, 2014: 244). All these characteristics of the repertoire of collective action were systematized by Taylor et al. in their analysis on same-sex wedding performances in the USA. The authors claim that the 'tactical repertoire' of action combines three basic elements, taken from both contentious and social constructionist approaches (2009: 867-868):

- a. Strategic and intentional forms of claim-making
- b. Contestation through practices and discourses which challenge dominant cultural codes and institutions
- c. Mobilization of supporters through the construction of a collective identity.

Based on this schematization, I view queer festivals as a significant, dynamic, tactical repertoire of queer politics in Europe at this moment. By perceiving the festival as a major part of the repertoire of collective action of queer politics, its importance for the study of the anti-identitarian discourse will emerge.

- a. Strategic and intentional forms of claim-making

Queer festivals in Europe are constructed through an imaginary of older, radical lesbian feminist events, which politicized everyday life, creating temporary zones of prefigurative politics, and empowering their members through cultural and political

events. According to Taylor and Whittier, older festivals in the USA linked the local lesbian feminist communities with each other, constructing a collective identity (1992: 112), based on the idea that ‘collective organizational structure and consensus decision’ were more feminist than hierarchy and bureaucratic structure (1995: 169). These opposing discourses on hierarchy and bureaucratic structure are now also greatly emphasized inside queer festivals. Queer festivals link explicitly to DIY movements. Moreover, they borrow from the older Queeruption festivals<sup>3</sup>, and the European social forums, which have been taking place across the continent for the last 15 years. Queeruption festivals in particular created the opportunity for new generations of activists to acquire experience and develop a transnational network. As a result, this kind of activist experience is now used for the creation of the urban queer festivals on a more regular basis, and with similar organizational and framing patterns as those of Queeruption.

#### b. Challenging dominant codes through practices

More recently, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly have enriched the idea of the repertoire as ‘the culturally encoded ways in which people interact in contentious politics’ (2001: 16). Contestation occurs equally at the symbolic level, in which ‘bodies, symbols, identities, practices and discourses are framed and deployed to target changes in multiple institutional arenas, including cultural codes and practices’ (Taylor et al., 2009: 867).

Queer festivals function as arenas where dominant identities and beliefs are questioned, and this questioning remains not only at the discursive level, but is also embodied in practices, engaging with a sort of prefigurative politics model. According to Leach, prefigurative politics refers to ‘a political orientation based on the premise that the ends a social movement achieves are fundamentally shaped by the means it employs and that movements should therefore do their best to choose means that embody or ‘prefigure’ the

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<sup>3</sup> See the next chapter



kind of society they want to bring about' (2013: 1004). In order for a movement to realize these prefigurative objectives, it needs a physical and/or digital space. Francesca Polletta has been theorizing the idea of 'free' spaces' for the last 15 years. In her latest work, she defines free spaces as 'small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, [...] and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization' (Polletta and Kretschmer, 2013: 477). In Europe, 'free spaces' usually flourish within squats. Free spaces do not necessarily require a physical space, as this can be replaced by an 'idiom' or a digital space, in which subaltern publics can become 'both performers of and audience for a new collective identity' (Polletta and Kretschmer, 2013: 478-479). In a similar vein, other authors have used the term 'convergence space' to describe a 'heterogeneous affinity-between various social formations, such as social movements' (Routledge, 2003: 345). This idea refers mostly to the big alterglobalization gatherings of the previous decade, rather than to the locally embedded political spaces, which have a longer history. Polletta and Kretschmer leave unanswered, however, the question of whether 'collectivist organizations, cultural festivals...intended to prefigure alternative ways of acting and interacting' succeed, and if so, to what extent. (2013: 479).

Queer festivals are in fact arenas in which actors attempt to construct 'free spaces' through their prefigurative visions. The idea of 'free' however is very often put at stake by the actors themselves, as will become obvious in the discussions on the anti-identitarian collective identity of the events.

### c. Construction of a collective identity

Collective identity has been one of the basic theoretical constructions of social movement studies since the late 80s. Identity helps create and sustain solidarity, while at the same time contributing to the shaping of common identifications, capable of generating future collective action. Social movement scholars have been particularly attentive to the

transformations of collective identities. Collective identity is defined as the process by which 'social actors recognize themselves - and are recognized by other actors - as part of broader groupings' (della Porta and Diani, 2006, 91). This approach views identity more as a 'process' than as a characteristic of pre-existing collective action, as the rational-actor model suggests ['...the existence of an *established* collective identity is assumed' (Gamson, 1992: 58)].

Taylor and Whittier's analyses on the lesbian feminist communities played a key role for the integration of the idea of collective identity within studies on political mobilization, by pointing to the creation of politicized identity communities (1995; 1992). In fact, Taylor and Whittier proposed a 'social movement community' model, which they described as 'a network of individuals and groups loosely linked through an institutional base, multiple goals and actions, and a collective identity that affirms members' common interests in opposition to dominant groups' (1992: 107). Inspired by Melucci's 'submerged networks' model (1989), they shifted the focus to new forms of resistance, including alternative symbolic systems, and other new forms of political struggle, such as drag performances (Taylor et al., 2004). Taylor and Whittier argued however that collective political actors do not necessarily share a common structural location, concluding that 'identity politics promotes a kind of cultural endogamy that, paradoxically, erects boundaries within the challenging group, dividing it on the basis of race, class, age, religion, ethnicity, and other factors' (1992: 113-114).<sup>4</sup>

This interest in the conceptualizations of collective identities has been seen as a paradigmatic shift of social movement studies towards the role of culture for collective

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<sup>4</sup> Their example is taken from the analysis of the American lesbian feminist movement of the 80s. We learn, for instance, that 'African-American feminists criticize the tendency of many white lesbian feminists to dictate a politics based on hegemonic cultural standards' and this is the reason they embrace different cultural styles (Taylor and Whittier, 1992: 121). What derives from this observation is that within the same lesbian feminist 'community', the cultural interpretations of the same narratives vary according to power relations developing within the movement ('hegemonic cultural standards') interrelated with identities being constructed through life experiences ('African-American').

action. This paradigmatic shift is manifested in the significant literature on the subject produced since the 90s. Exemplary works include the recognition of narrative dimensions of social change (Fine, 1995), the construction of meaning as a movement's primary function (Johnson and Klandermans, 1995), the role of emotions in protest (Goodwin et al., 2006), and the symbolic dimensions of activism and the politicization of the self in daily life (Gamson and Moon, 2004; Gamson, 1995; Taylor et al., 2004; Taylor and Whittier, 1992, 1995).

As the alterglobalization movement started to expand through World and European Social Forums, the interest in collective identity shifted from 'identity politics' towards a more open and inclusive model, in which collective identity is based on the different experiences that social movement actors share. This new model could be described as one in which 'identity shift[s] from single-movement identity to multiple, *tolerant* identities', which 'are characterized by inclusiveness and positive emphasis upon diversity and cross-fertilization, with limited identification' (della Porta, 2005: 186). This definition of collective identity changes from its previous conceptualizations, according to which actors are assumed to share more 'stable', exclusive and unique identities. The alterglobalization movement's 'emphasis on diversity' shifts the social movement literature towards the subjective experiences of the activists, and the multiple identifications they develop through their individual life trajectories and simultaneous structural locations. The theoretical inspirations for this paradigm shift came from European scholars of social movements. Melucci argued that 'individuals are becoming the social core of what we would have called, in more traditional terms, 'the social structure' (1996, 145), insisting that 'social conflicts emerge at the level of individual experience' (2000, 40). Finally, Touraine, in his sociological work on the subject, highlighted 'the aspiration to make of our own existence a meaningful whole' (2000, 145).

In more recent debates, scholars have identified a third paradigm of collective identity: the anti-identitarian collective identity model. Based upon post-structuralist critical theories, inspired by Michel Foucault, the anti-identitarian critique challenges the 'very

idea of an identity’ (Jasper et al., forthcoming: 29). According to Flesher-Fominaya, anti-identitarian identity can be broadly described as ‘a collective identity that has as a central defining characteristic a refusal to have a common central defining characteristic’ (forthcoming: 72). This belief is based on two features:

- a. The ‘unwillingness to self-identify with a defining label or to engage in credentialism or representation as a prerequisite for political participation’, and
- b. A ‘refusal to subscribe to credentialism and the representative logics of politics as practised by the institutional left (Flesher-Fominaya, forthcoming: 72-73)

Although, this anti-identity collective identity has managed to mobilize many members across Europe and beyond, the paradox it creates has been viewed as risky and harmful for a movement. As Flesher-Fominaya points out with regards to the Spanish autonomous movement, the:

‘Collective identity that has as a central defining characteristic a refusal to have a common central defining characteristic...is most often *invisible* to outsiders as a coherent identifiable set of actors or mobilizing principles’ (forthcoming) [author’s italics].

### 1.2.3 Towards a queer reading of collective identity?

Tracing the different collective identity models, it seems that we are actually facing a ‘queer turn’. Jasper and McGarry argue that suspicion against collective identities is, in reality, an influence from queer studies:

‘Scholars and activists today –*influenced by queer studies*– may feel that they are the first to be uncomfortable with strong collective identities, but that is probably because scholarly portrayals of the past exaggerate the homogeneity of groups and identities’ (forthcoming: 14) [Italics mine]

Therefore, in order to avoid strong identifications, which in the past have been experienced as oppressive, social movements nowadays tend to fragment their discourses, in order to attract actors with no fixed, exclusionary, and positively defined identities. As part of a strategic paradigm shift, many social movements of the radical left have abandoned strong identifications, conforming gradually to the rhetoric of 'fluid and dynamic' identities (Gamson and Moon, 2004: 49).<sup>5</sup>

As part of this recent process, queer festivals attempt to open themselves to actors with no fixed identities, by celebrating their anti-identitarian logics. What happens in reality, however, is that 'queer...does not so much press to abandon identity categories but rethinks them as open to conflicting and multiple meanings and as always interlocking with categories of gender, race, class, and so on.' (Nicholson and Seidman, 1995, 17). In other words, queer festivals are not outside the collective identities model. Rather, their debates are part of an ongoing project of delineating the *we*, whose rights and freedom are at stake in the movements (Gamson, 1995: 393).

The *anti-identitarian narrative* of queer politics, to which queer festivals also aspire, is linked historically to two basic oppositional features:

- i) The belief in an anti-essentialist understanding of socially constructed categories. In other words, queer politics has been built upon the rejection of biological determinisms of gender and sexuality, and the binary constructions of their identities. Moreover, queer groups' discourses celebrate sexual autonomy and proliferating sexual difference, in opposition to the repressive conformity of heteronormativity (Portwood-Stacer, 2010). As I will show in the next chapter, characteristic examples of sex positivity in the USA were groups such as SexPanick! and Queer Nation.
- ii) Queer politics has been associated with a non-assimilationist stance, a 'term of self-empowerment' (Jasper et al., forthcoming). Based on this narrative, queer

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<sup>5</sup> I assume that the recent movements of Indignados and Gezi Park in Istanbul could be categorized under the umbrella of anti-identitarian movements too, since they did not proclaim strong and fixed collective identities.

activists have been confronting queerness less as an identity, than as a *critique of identity*. The anti-assimilationist character of queerness is claimed to be a 'marker of one's distance from conventional norms in all facets of life, not only the sexual' (Epstein, 1994, 195), linking queerness to alternative lifestyles.

*Identity*, therefore, is a pretty risky term to use for queer movements. In fact, the latter have been constructed and solidified around an anti-identity narrative, which considers every form of identity, but not necessarily of identification<sup>6</sup>, an oppressive stigma which needs to be deconstructed urgently.

Queer festivals' collective identity is based on the 'multiple, tolerant identities' model (della Porta, 2005: 186), where struggle is based on 'recognition of difference rather than on imputed commonalities in experience' (Nicholson and Seidman, 1995: 12). This multiple-identities model is largely promoted through the festivals' official discourses, while the horizontal mode of organization contributes equally. At the same time, queer festivals share many of the characteristics of the 'anti-identitarian' model. Borrowing from queer theory, according to which sexual and gender identities are socially constructed, and thus function as operations of power, the anti-identitarian narrative has paradoxically erected a new identity. But is this anti-identitarian paradox in the end so risky? And if yes, how does it still succeed in mobilizing, twenty years after its birth, so many people?

Collective identities Models	Theory	Principal example	
Identity politics	Social movement communities (Taylor and Whittier)	Lesbian feminism	
Multiple identities	Tolerance and	Alterglobalization	Queer festivals

<sup>6</sup> I borrow from Ziv's argument on Israeli queer activism, that politics of identification operate 'across identity boundaries' and thus help constitute, sustain and resignify queer identity. (2010: 550)

	openness (Della Porta)	movement	
Anti-identitarian	Refusal to be represented (Jasper et al.; Queer studies)	European autonomous movements, American queer politics	Queer festivals

Table 1.2 Collective identities models and Queer Festivals

How does the strategic choice of the festival, as repertoire of action, shape the construction of the anti-identitarian identity? This question still needs some further theoretical insights. The choice of the festival as a significant part of the repertoire of action can be explained by unpacking the logics of queer groups in their attempt to build and promote an oppositional culture, embodied through a specific ethos. I see ethos as ‘the distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, or guiding beliefs of a person, group, or institution’<sup>7</sup>, translated into ‘the corresponding expression of [individuals’] standardized affective aspects’ (Bateson, 1958: 33). Bourdieu in particular has been attentive to ethos as a central tool for the sociological constitution of a field, since ethos relates to each particular field’s normative structure. As he said, ‘there is no better word for morality than ethos’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 86). According to Bourdieu, the power of social class ethos is determining for the actors’ degree of investment in the game, and the strategies of cultural placement (Bourdieu, 1984). Therefore, ethos should be viewed as inextricably linked to the affective and normative incorporations of social movement actors and participants.

For movements such as queer groups, whose antagonism goes beyond that towards the state and other bureaucratic institutions, building a collective identity through a morally codified ethos is crucial for their existence and their maintenance across time and space. Therefore, it is essential for these groups to build an oppositional narrative based on their own identities and their specific ways of performing politics. The construction of this oppositional narrative finds its own path inside queer festivals, which function as spaces

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<sup>7</sup> Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia

that provide oppositional arenas. For this to become clear, I now turn to the means used in order to construct this oppositional culture.

#### **1.2.4 Turning to counterpublics**

In order to understand the puzzle –how an anti-identity ideology does not destroy the movement it attempts to construct- I shift my attention to counterpublic theory. The inspiration comes from Craig Calhoun's latest publication *The roots of radicalism: Tradition, the public sphere and early 19<sup>th</sup> century social movements* (2012). In his analysis, Calhoun acknowledges the importance of addressing the relationship of public spheres to social movements, by questioning to what extent diverse publics can contribute to the more general formation of public opinion, and thus of the public sphere itself:

‘In this way we can approach it [the official public sphere] not as a privileged vantage point erected outside social struggles to give a view of the universal and *not simply as a product of rational-critical argumentation among individuals*. We can see it as always plural; [as] product of social struggles, institutional formations and culture’ (2012: 151)

But why should we approach queer festivals as arenas of alternative ‘distinct public spheres’? I will first show how queer festivals relate indirectly to the state and the official public sphere, and therefore to institutional claim making. Such an idea allows an escape from rational-choice or political opportunities models, and a shift of our attention to cultural criticisms on how such events sustain themselves, by mobilizing on an anti-identitarian identity. The explanation will be provided by the contribution of *counterpublics*. Counterpublics shift the attention to the circulation of texts and the alternative modes of address, of a movement which sets its goal to politicize issues that are ignored by institutionalized agendas.

#### **1.2.5 Counterpublics, social movements and the state**



It is usually argued that social movements are, at least in part, state-oriented, pushing for political or legislative change, making claims against public institutions and international organizations. Tarrow argues for instance that

‘Contentious collective action serves as the basis of social movements...because it is the main and often the only recourse that most ordinary people possess to demonstrate their claims against better-equipped opponents or powerful states’  
(2011: 7-8)

The interest in studying social movements’ interaction with the state gave birth to significant theories on the structures of political process and of political opportunity. The former explains how social movements interact with the state or political institutions, to obtain resources (McAdam et al., 2001), while the latter focuses on the opportunities political institutions offer to social movements for successful collective actions (della Porta and Diani, 2006: 16-19).

These theories undeniably shaped the way gay and lesbian movements were discussed in the relevant literature. The recent publication *Lesbian and Gay movement and the state* introduces powerful insights into the ways gay and lesbian social movements across the globe interplay, according to open or closed opportunity structures, and depending on the context in which they develop (Tremblay et al., 2011). Other recent publications illustrate this tendency. Taylor et al. have addressed the issues of same-sex wedding performances as a political claim in California (2009). Mary Bernstein’s analysis on the strategic uses of the gay identity in order for the movement to gain access to benefits is also relevant (1997). According to these theories, gay and lesbian movements are more or less spatialized in stable locations: offices, infrastructure, while their state-oriented character channels them into playing the role of the rational actor. These rational social movements interplay with states or public collectivities, pushing for change, usually in the legislative arena, and achieve, accordingly, some of their claims. The abovementioned works describe the direct relationship of gay and lesbian movements with the state. Resource

mobilization and political process theories are explored thoroughly, to understand the involvement of the gay and lesbian movement in the official public sphere, and the degree of their achievement in the institutional arena.

Not all social movements however have direct links to the official public sphere and the state. By analysing the constitution of radical social movements in early 19<sup>th</sup> century England, Calhoun argues that the plebeian public ‘did not simply develop in parallel to the bourgeois public sphere’, but ‘both bourgeois and plebeian public spheres took shape through the process by which elites excluded popular voices from what had been a less class-structured public sphere’. (2012: 159). Therefore, the ‘radical counterpublic was formed in response to this exclusion and was always shaped by aspirations either to constitute or to transform the legitimate public’. (Calhoun, 2012: 159). Although Calhoun sees exclusion as a one-sided process, from the bourgeois to the plebeian sphere, he acknowledges the active contribution of plebeians to the creation of radical counterpublics. The construction was made possible through ‘popular meetings’, where oppositional discourses circulated, through ‘small gatherings’ and ‘public house meetings’ (idem: 160). Radical intellectuals pushed for the use of ‘symbolic communication’ (banners, songs, items of clothing etc.). All these communication symbols affirmed the *identity* of participants as members of a specific public:

‘Participation in such public events, along with the radical press thus involved an element of cultural creation; it mattered as experience and performance and not only as rational-critical discussion’ (Calhoun, 2012: 160)

Concerning the political projects of radicals, Calhoun argues that although their claims might sound like ‘imaginaries’, that does not mean they were not true. What matters is rather the way these publics thought the world should work, and how this imagination depended on ‘the language and forms of understanding that make thinking and communication possible’ (idem: 162). In other words, politics was a ‘struggle over which imaginary would have greater sway’ (162), a different sort of *political poiesis*, defined as

the attempt 'to form culture in the public sphere rather than only engage in rational-critical discourse'. As follows, counterpublics were willing to 'shape politics itself and not simply rectify social and economic harms, severe as these were' (180; also Warner, 2002: 82)<sup>8</sup>.

The endorsement of 'counterpublics' by Calhoun follows a recent debate on the exclusionary practices of the bourgeois official public sphere, introduced by Habermas. In her famous article 'Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy' (1990), Nancy Fraser makes an analytic critique of the 'bourgeois' public sphere, as it had been conceptualized by Habermas one year previously (1989). According to Fraser,

'Members of subordinated social groups – women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians - have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics. I propose to call these *subaltern counterpublics* in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (1990: 67) [italics mine]

The idea of subaltern counterpublics is still alive after almost 20 years, when in her article 'Transnationalizing the public sphere', Fraser claims that the 'proliferation of subaltern counterpublics could enhance the participation of subordinated strata in stratified societies' (2007: 12)

Revolutionary as it was from a feminist perspective, Fraser's conceptualization does not break free from the rational-critical frame of Habermas' paradigm. In reality, Fraser only paraphrases Habermas when she opens up the idea of public sphere to subaltern counterpublics. Although she brings into discussion discourses which tend to be forgotten

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<sup>8</sup> Warner's concept of 'poetic world making' is very relevant to our discussion: 'The point here is that this perception of public discourse as conversation obscures the importance of the poetic functions of both language and corporeal expressivity in giving a particular shape to publics. The [rational-critical] public is thought to exist empirically and to require persuasion rather than poesis' (2002: 82)

precisely because they are excluded from the official public sphere, the vocabularies, the way the discourse is produced and displayed, remain unquestioned. In the end, Fraser's subaltern counterpublics are still rational publics, though structurally excluded from the public sphere.

Michael Warner's ideas on 'publics and counterpublics' constitute until now the basic critiques of the rationalizing arguments of Nancy Fraser. Departing from Fraser's conceptualization of subaltern counterpublics, Michael Warner claimed that the conflicts within counterpublics extend 'not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media' (2002: 86). In other words, counterpublics address conflicts in the *content* and *form* of speech. This capacity to address conflicts in both the form and the content differentiates counterpublics from the model of the rational-critical debate as Habermas imagined it. A mode of address, beyond the rational-critical style of discourse, should be seen as an alternative way to convey a political message: style, emotions, performances and other similar registers (hooks<sup>9</sup>, 1990:21). This idea of what constitutes an extra-rational mode of address conforms to the expanded version of what a discourse is, and states in which texts it can be located. In any case, a counterpublic is an autonomous 'space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself' (Warner, 2002: 50). Discourses are to be found in texts. By texts, we should include everything that can be read and thus interpreted: written texts, performances, images, and videos:

'Discourse ... is not always and exclusively verbal: Issues and attitudes are expressed and contested in dance, music, gesture, food, ritual, artefact, symbolic action, as well as words ... Investigated historically within their political contexts, [cultural performances] ... are profoundly deliberative occasions' (Conquergood, 1991: 189; cited in Pezzullo, 2003: 350)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> References to bell hooks will keep to the author's decision to write her name in minuscule letters, as a way to overcome patriarchal denomination.

<sup>10</sup> The definition follows the theoretical trend of Laclau and Mouffe who define discourse as not only 'purely linguistic phenomena; but... [as] the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive formation is structured' (2001: 109)

Finally, a counterpublic should not be seen just as a public ‘with a reform program’, but is supposed to maintain, consciously or not, ‘an awareness on its subordinate status’ (Warner, 2002: 119).

#### 1.2.6 Queer festivals and Counterpublics

Social movement scholars have endorsed the paradigm of *political poiesis* as Calhoun calls it. People not engaging in rational-critical discourse are equally recognized as having the agency to perform politics by developing extra-rational modes of address, for instance through their bodies and new modes of language they utilize. Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp’s (2003) study on performative politics of drag queens in American cabarets constitutes a useful tool to explore the dynamics of extra-rational modes of forming culture in the public sphere. In their case, performances, which do not address rational claims to an identifiable institutional opponent, cannot be analysed through models based on rational choice or opportunity structures.

The queer anti-identitarian discourse endorsing the fluidity of gender and sexuality seems to be opposed to the sexual stabilization that the LGBT movement promotes, in order to gain access to the official public sphere and thus derive benefits from national and international politics. The process of institutionalization and bureaucratization of gay rights has therefore caused LGBT politics to become a legitimate part of the official public sphere, leaving outside the frame other questions and discourses which do not fit into these legislative-oriented, rational debates.

Queer festivals’ *discursive* subordinate position vis-à-vis the state, together with the lack of financial resources, clearly cuts a path for queer festivals to communicate messages to the official public sphere<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, their lack of a long-term plan of action, and the

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<sup>11</sup> As I will discuss later, subordinate in a queer festival refers to their counter-hegemonic discourses, rather than the structural position of its actors

opacity of their claims (Who is the opponent?) cannot be explained through rational choices or political opportunity structures. However, their own identities, practices, networks and spaces should be given a name, since they are ‘relevant for a longer term and cultural approach to social and political power’ (Olesen, 2011: 253). By looking at the discourses which circulate, and the practices promoted within the queer festivals, we will be able to ascertain how a strongly anti-identitarian movement constructs an identity, and through which means. By locating the building of queer festivals’ collective identity, not solely in their rational-critical strategies, but rather in the development of a distinct ‘symbolic communication’ (Calhoun, 2012: 160), the ideas on counterpublics will stand crucial for the development of the dissertation’s research question.

### **1.3 Dimensions of analysis**

In order to trace the construction of the queer anti-identitarian identity, I advance a fourfold understanding, consisting of four theoretical admissions, which will guide the division of the dissertation into four distinct empirical chapters, each of them focusing on a specific set of collective practices which organize queer festivals. These four admissions are the following:

- a. Escape from rational choice, political process and political opportunities models, since the queer movement does not relate directly to the state and the official public sphere.
- b. Approach queer publics not only as collective action performers, but also as counterpublics, which are built as oppositional publics to dominant narratives of the public sphere.
- c. Focus on the *practices*, which reify a specific ethos, rather trying to explain the anti-identitarian paradox as a result of a rational choice. Check how and why such a discourse emerges and becomes sustained across time and space.
- d. Build the links between collective practices and social actors’ *habitus*

Points A and B were exhausted in the previous sections. Queer festivals function as spaces which do not address directly the state or other institutional actors. They set rather as aim to build an alternative narrative of their identities; a narrative which focuses on the constructed and thus fluid character of gender and sexuality. This opposition is not however made only through argumentative discourses. Queer publics deploy a variety of non-verbal communicative means to promote their oppositional interpretations to the dominant narratives of the official public sphere. Therefore, queer festivals function as spaces in which counterpublics emerge.

The admission of points A and B will function as a catalyzer for the exploration of queer identity-work, using ethnographic approaches, pointing to the collective practices which constitute it. Their deployment in specific spaces will allow us to see these collective practices as ‘spatial’, and including ‘habits of dress and speech, as well as places of protest and cultural repertoires of popular tactics’ (Doucette, 2013: 307). The tactics, in particular, create in the course of the struggle ‘practices that act to constitute a common – though far from consensual – space and time’ (Ross, 2002: 74). Characteristic of horizontal spaces, the study of the internal collective practices which constitute them as queer festivals brings essential insights into the way ‘current practices of the movement [prefigure] the values of freedom, equality and community’ (Polletta, 2002: 6).

The study of collective practices is particularly useful for another two reasons. First, it allows a grasp of the non-verbal, by pointing to areas difficult to verbalize, and thus excluded from the framing process, which places its focus mostly on the ‘discursive processes...that occur primarily in the context of, or in relation to, movement activities.’ (Benford and Snow, 2000: 623). An illuminating case is that of vegan food practices. Although excluded from the official discursive narrative of what queerness is about, its performative deployment within the spaces makes it an essential part of the identity-work of queer festivals in Northern Europe. Second, studying the collective practices which constitute these events as queer festivals, illuminates the capacities of social actors to act as creative agents, putting an end to the binaries of structure/agency. Being the expressive

means of habitus, practices point to the agents' capacities for invention, while inversely it is precisely this inventive capacity which makes social actors active agents.

To come to point D, practices bring to the surface the concept of habitus, as 'insisting on a resolutely *sociological* view of action' (Sweetman, 2009: 492 -emphasis in the text). Habitus thus can guide the way collective practices are implemented, accepted, resisted and interpreted by social actors. Habitus 'is guided by the desire to reintroduce the agent's practices, his or her capacity for invention and improvisation', making creative capacity the feature of 'an acting agent' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 13). According to Bourdieu, habitus describes:

'Systems of durable transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them' (1990b: 53).

It will become clear through the activists' and participants' accounts that their stories tend to be presented as coherent and logical<sup>12</sup>, while others like to romanticize (Faris, 1980) or tend to overemphasize the political and social context over and above their personal experiences (della Porta, 1992: 182). These standpoints reflect primarily the internal predispositions of the respondents, as they have been formed through their early socialization, their education and the way they developed relationally in their subsequent social and political experience.

Habitus is a useful analytical tool, which provides the necessary explanations for the different visions of the actors within the queer festivals. It will allow us to explore the cultural codes which structure the spaces, not as neutral dispositions, but as relationally constructed interpretations of the actors, based on the 'active presence of past experiences [...] in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action' (Bourdieu, 1990b: 54).

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<sup>12</sup> '[life histories] are characterized by a very strong tendency to look for justifications for their behaviour which are in line with their political or ideological beliefs, and to link their own individual choices to an historical –class or generational – destiny (della Porta, 1992: 182)



These different schemes of perception will explain, in their turn, the different degrees of participation in the building-process and incorporation of the queer anti-identitarian identity. Chapter 7 in particular will reveal the uneven distribution and appropriation of the cultural codes by actors, and their links with their habitus will be specifically addressed in order to proceed to further explanations, regarding the work of identity-building.

Habitus should not be seen however as static and deterministic. I promote an interpretation of habitus as dynamically transformed by political experiences, and by the social and emotional relations of actors during their adulthood. For example, in chapter 4, I will show that what informs the actors' schemes of perception is not their social backgrounds as such, but rather the way they relate these to their subsequent activist experiences, reflected in their position within the hierarchy of the festival. This dynamic conceptualization of habitus is required particularly because many of the participants and the respondents have experienced class mobility, due to macro-structural political transformations or other family reasons. Although the majority of the respondents were from middle-class backgrounds, and acquired higher education, many had experienced political changes, which affected their class background. This was the case for Vella, for example: he was born in East Germany, and his mother was dismissed from the public kindergarten where she worked until 1989, when the Berlin Wall collapsed. Robin was affected by the Intifada movement in Palestine during the '80s, and by a subsequent brutal deportation of his family from Kuwait where his father worked at the time. Gem experienced downward class mobility when she was teenager, when her father's company went bankrupt. Giacomo, on the contrary, experienced upward class mobility when his father was elected to the Italian parliament in the '90s.

This is the basic rationale of the thesis' dissertation. Several other questions will also emerge. The most significant sets of sub-questions are the following:

- a. What does a queer counterpublic look like empirically? Although the concept of ‘counterpublics’ has been theorized and is entering gradually into the social movement literature (Calhoun, 2012: 152-180 ‘The reluctant counterpublic’; Fraser (2005) cited in: della Porta and Rucht, 2013: 9), we do not have wide empirical evidence of what such counterpublics look like, while there is the tendency to conflate publics with counterpublics, without proceeding to a clear analytic distinction between the two (Olesen, 2005: 423).
- b. Which hegemonic discourses are queer festivals challenging, and how? In other words, what does ‘counter’ imply for queer festivals? Would queer actors move beyond the idea of ‘rational’ argumentation and political praxis? Would they use other ‘modes of address’, other ways of doing politics beyond the ‘voices, arguments, and views that are not expressed in the forms of argumentation regimented as properly rational-critical’? (Calhoun, 2012: 124) Finally, how do transnational counterpublics shape the collective identity of a social movement?

Although I acknowledge the existence of differences in each festival, my research does not have as its objective a comparative analysis. What constitutes the scope of this research is basically to explore how the queer anti-identitarian identity is constructed across Europe, rather than tracing festivals’ local differences. Since queer festivals do not relate directly to the state, I found it irrelevant to follow a cross-national model (for more details see the methodological chapter). In other words, I will verify the assumption that queer festivals present similarities at the following levels: organizational, cultural, and ideological. The argument of Monforte and Dufour is quite useful here. Their research on undocumented migrants’ mobilization in three different cities (Paris, Berlin, Montreal) revealed that its symbolic dimension is shaped by a particular situation, in which they claim that ‘whatever the specifics of the national context in which they mobilize, the meaning of their actions is linked to triggering a process of the emancipation of protestors from state power’ (Monforte and Dufour, 2012: 3). Therefore, the migrants’ collective actions signified ‘a politicization of their presence in the public sphere’ (2012: 8). The differences in the festivals will be revealed as long as they are relevant to the research

questions. Therefore, the attribution of festivals' differences in their local contexts will be scrutinized ad hoc on a case-to-case basis, and only if relevant.

### 1.3.1 Summing Up

I contextualized the idea of 'queer counterpublics' as a response to the anti-identity paradox that the queer festivals tends to fall into. My analytical approach asks whether and to what extent queer festivals act as arenas which are capable of generating counterpublics, and if so, under which conditions. My assumption is that rather than making a clear rational response to the 'queer dilemma' (Gamson, 1995), queer festivals engage with the reification of specific practices and become spaces where specific discourses circulate. Therefore, a systematic analysis of the practices and the discourses promoted within the festivals should be at the centre of the investigation. When it comes to the interviews with organizers or participants in the festivals, they will be analysed as relating to the discourses of the festivals, rather than as deriving from rational reflections on the matter. By a qualitative analysis of six queer festivals, I will identify the *common patterns*, which sustain and solidify the existence of queer counterpublics across time and space. The table below shows the levels of analysis as they relate to the case studies.

**Table 1.3 Dimensions of analysis: The anti-identity paradox and the construction of queer counterpublics**

Dimensions of analysis (Deliberative processes and other modes of address)	Commonalities in the six queer festivals across Europe
(Reification of) Discourses	Circulation of texts, content of texts, performative politics, workshops, music. Interpretations of activists

(Reification of) Practices	At the level of organization, transnationalism, networking, eating, dressing. Interpretations of activists
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The research is a systematization and interpretation of the commonalities which allow queer festivals to construct regular publics, despite the intense promotion of the anti-identity paradox. These commonalities are not limited to the content of the discourse, but extend to the form of the discourse, to the ‘modes of address’ (Warner, 2002). An analysis of practices which are outside the deliberative model of political organization will allow us to grasp different forms of communication.

### 1.3.2 Outline

Chapter 2 presents a thorough analysis of the methodological choice. An analysis of multi-sited ethnography will be operated, while the specific qualitative methods (interviews, observation, document analysis, focus groups) will be also explained.

Chapter 3 is the first step in presenting part of the empirical data. A history of queer politics in the USA and Europe will be attempted, while sociological findings from the online survey will be displayed. Finally, a presentation of the case studies will present the queer festivals used as units of analysis. This chapter functions as an empirical introduction to the four following chapters, in which the main analysis of the collective practices which give meaning to the queer anti-identitarian identity will take place.

Chapter 4 presents in a systematic way the organizational practices of queer festivals. I describe in particular the spaces in which festivals take place, and the way horizontality is performed through a set of ritualized practices. I will demonstrate in particular how spatial practices, assemblies, daily plenaries, workshops and performances constitute practices which organize the festivals as counterpublic arenas and set the basis on which

identity-work is to be built. A particular emphasis will be placed on the DIY ethos and its role for the deployment of an oppositional identity.

Chapter 5 will attempt to define queer festivals as arenas taking place in transnational public spheres. Through the systematic presentation and analysis of those practices which constitute festivals as transnational sites of contestation, I will demonstrate how queer festivals build oppositional publics not only at the local, but also at the transnational level. I refer in particular to the languages used inside the festivals, the networking among actors across borders, digital communication, and cross-border socialization.

Chapter 6 brings into discussion the debates on identity construction which take place through discursive and non-verbal practices. Through an extensive analysis of festivals' callouts, I will show how these set the fundamentals of an identity ideal already put in motion before the festival begins. Callouts hold the capacity of building boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The general tendency is to opt for an inclusive strategy. In reality, however, inclusiveness is not always successfully performed. Moreover, the role of performance, as a non-verbal communication style, will be explored by presenting two cases from two highly performative collective actions that took place at the Rome festival. Finally, the discursive attempt to build theoretical coalitions with the theories of autonomy and the commons will be presented at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 7 specifies what I call 'cultural practices': that is, practices which hold highly symbolic value. Thus, the practices of dressing, eating and speaking will be addressed as modes to promote specific codes within the festivals. These codes contribute in a secondary, but not less significant way, to who is really 'queer' and who is less so, and therefore in the identity-work of the spaces. Stories of clash of habitus will reveal the internal tensions and will illustrate queer festivals as spaces in which internal symbolic homogeneity is far from being achieved.

**Table 1.4 Chapters Description**

Chapter Numbers	Basic Title	Content
Chapter 2	Methodology	Multi-sited ethnography Semi-structured Interviews Document analysis
Chapter 3	Contextualization	Genealogy Social basis Case description
Chapter 4	Organization	Horizontality and D.I.Y ethos
Chapter 5	Transnationalism	Networking. Transnational practices
Chapter 6	Promotion of the anti-identity narrative	Festivals as counterpublic arenas Performative politics
Chapter 7	Cultural practices	Language, dressing, eating: Maintaining a middle-class ethos?
Chapter 8	Conclusion	Counterpublics: What contribution for democracy?

## **Chapter 2.**

### **Studying counterpublics across the European space: a multi-sited ethnography of queer festivals**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This is the first study of queer activism in Europe to focus on its dynamics as a social movement, and to deal with issues of transnationalization and interpretations of the movement's discourses. The study is based on ethnographic approaches. Ethnography does not use a consistent methodology, however, applicable the same way to every topic. The dissertation's ethnographic approach is multi-sited in its orientation, since it views queer festivals as socially interconnected sites across the European space, as semi-autonomous social fields 'vulnerable to rules and decisions and other forces emanating from the larger world by which surrounded' (Moore, 1978: 55), and not only influenced by the state in which they occur, and its political traditions.

Under the umbrella of multi-sited ethnography, various qualitative methods are mobilized for the study of queer festivals: participant observation, interviews, which take the form of life histories, and focus groups<sup>13</sup>. Participant observation is built on specific ways of reflective participation in the movement, as well as conventional modes of taking notes of events, interactions, and practices. Moreover, influenced by Touraine's sociological intervention, I organized two focus groups during which activists and participants were asked to discuss aspects relating to language and class. Concerning life histories, I used the model of in-depth, open-ended interviews, widely used in social movement studies.

The advantage of this purely qualitative methodology, and the use of interchangeable methods, is a deeper exploration of (1) the queer anti-identity paradox, and of (2) the

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<sup>13</sup> Discourse analysis and conceptual theorizations influenced by grounded theory were used marginally. Therefore, I will not proceed to their analysis in this chapter, but only when they appear.

construction of counterpublics. In this chapter, I will first analyse the relevance of multi-sited ethnography for the research (1). Then, I will describe more precisely the specific methods I used in order to collect and analyse my material (2).

## **2.2 Theorizing the methodology: Multi-sited ethnography**

Queer is occupying Europe. From Oslo to Rome and from Berlin to Amsterdam, political groups organize under the label ‘queer’, distancing themselves from the traditional identities of ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ etc. Instead of asking why, my dissertation focuses on ‘how?’ How does queer as an anti-identitarian identity (Jasper and McGarry, forthcoming) mobilize people across the continent on a regular basis? In the introduction, I assumed that this mobilization takes place through arenas in which specific discourses are promoted and certain practices are reified. What are these, and why do they occur similarly in every setting?

Until some decades ago, ethnography focused predominantly on subjects suffering systemic domination (‘subalterns’), whereas (counter-) cultural production and diffusion was disregarded. The relations of the queer festivals’ discourse with the academic discipline of queer theory, the perpetuation of the middle-class ethos through their practices within the festivals, as well as the social locations of many of the activists serve just to reconfirm the idea of the ‘loss of the subaltern’ (Marcus, 1995: 101)<sup>14</sup>. Shifting the attention to non-subaltern phenomena, and trying to identify connected counter-public formations within western European advanced economies, a specific methodology is required: one which could be attentive to the circulation of discourses and the configuration of practices, as they are performed across multiple sites. Multi-sited ethnography thus seems the most appropriate methodology for such a purpose. In this part, I will trace the links between ethnography and social movement studies. I will then

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<sup>14</sup> See also Chapter 2, the survey results



explain the relevance of multi-sited ethnography as the most appropriate methodology for this research.

### 2.2.1 Ethnography in social movement studies

The empirical part of my research is based upon ethnographic approaches in social sciences. What I will try to do in this part is to respond to the call to theorize ethnography in social movements, as it is at present considered under-theorized (Edelman, 2001: 309). As McAdam argues,

‘Movement researchers will need to supplement the traditional macro and micro staples of movement analysis – case studies or event research in the case of the former and survey research in connection with the latter – with a more serious investment in ethnography and other methods designed to shed empirical light on the *meso-level* dynamics that shape and sustain collective action over time’ (2001, 7) [underlining mine].

Even according to political process theory supported by McAdam, ethnography allows for a broader study and comprehension of social movement practices, which can help the researcher bridge the gap between macro and microstructures, by pointing to the ‘meso-level’. This need to pay attention to the ‘meso-level’, likely brought to the surface by ethnographic methods, has been demanded since the late ‘80s, when the same author, with McCarty and Zald, was asking for ‘more systematic qualitative fieldwork into the dynamics of collective action at the intermediate meso-level’, required for the study of ‘the *ongoing accomplishment of collective action*’ (McAdam, McCarty, and Zald, 1988: 729).

In fact, during the last two decades, social movement scholars have engaged with ethnographic methods, trying to connect the micro with the macro level. In reality, not only does ethnography allow the researcher to explore the ‘meso-level’, being privileged

by resource mobilization and political process theories<sup>15</sup>, but it also offers a lens through which to develop a closer look at the subtle power relations developed between the actors within the movement, as well as the context in which these develop.

Anthropologists of social movements, in particular, have argued for the idea of ethnography as the appropriate methodology to focus on the lived experiences and the way social actors attribute meaning to them. Marc Edelman, in his work on changing paradigms in social movements, argues that:

‘Political process and NSMs theorists could benefit from a greater sensitivity to the historical and cultural processes through which some of their main analytical categories (frames, submerged networks, movement culture) are constructed, as well as a more genuine appreciation of the lived experience of movement participants and nonparticipants. Something that is accessible primarily through ethnography, oral narratives, or documentary history’ (2001: 309).

He equally believes that ethnography in social movement studies is not fairly represented, and uses Whittier’s ethnographic analysis on radical feminism (1995) as an exemplar of how an ethnographic approach in social movements can provide a window onto submerged networks, activities, ideological differences, repression and fear. The idea that social movements (studies) need to shift their attention to ‘lived experiences’ is common both in Whittier’s and Edelman’s account and it reveals the convergence of post-structuralism and feminism, concerning the idea that the personal experience can become a source of knowledge.

In addition, ethnography allows for reflection on the relation of the researcher herself with the movement. Feminist scholars, in particular, have considered ethnography as the

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<sup>15</sup> ‘The resource mobilization and political process paradigm privileges systemic and *middle-level variables*- such as political opportunity space, ideological and organizational resources, mobilizational networks, leadership, and so on- in explaining movement emergence and development, while paying limited attention to the discursive practices and political identities forged by social movements’ [*italics mine*] (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992: 14)

most appropriate way to access the lived experiences of activists, because of their critical identification with, or sympathy for the movement they study. Therefore, the subfield of sexual and gender movements, whose scholars tend to be related to feminism, has enriched social movement studies with more reflective forms of ethnography. Nancy Whittier, by following such an approach, has explained how lesbian communes managed to keep radicalism alive during the '80s (1995). More recently, Benjamin Shepard studied the dynamics of the queer movement in the USA through a historical ethnography, while describing his position inside the movement, by reflecting upon his own role as researcher and activist (2010). Moreover, Taylor and Rupp have worked on the drag performers of a small city in the southern states of the USA (2003). Although the authors used a traditional ethnographic approach (single-site, thick description), they managed to bring to the surface activists' feelings, emotions, subtle gestures in a way that enriches social movement studies with new ways of viewing activism, beyond the conventional approaches of contentious politics.

### 2.2.2 Multi-sited Ethnography: How to extend the study of social movements on multiple locations and beyond the state

I want to shift the attention now to how I moved from the idea of conducting a 'cross-national' to the idea of using a 'multi-sited' ethnography. I will try to problematize the idea of 'cross-national' as a state-centred concept, and then by using tools from Tarrow's 'new' transnational activism (2005) and the theoretical frame of Marcus' 'multi-sited ethnography' (1995/1999), build my methodological approach for this research.

Sidney Tarrow argues that transnational activism 'could become the hinge between a world of states and one in which state-ness is no more than one identity among many: local, national and transnational' (2005: 2). Although he claims that internationalization can create this opportunity for a broad range of transnational activism, his main interest remains 'transnational contention', as 'conflicts that link transnational activists to one

another, to states, and to international institutions' (2005: 25). It is obvious that Tarrow does not include in his new transnational framework marginal forms of politics, or movements whose principal target is not the state per se. Other attempts at conceptualizing transnational activism still remain narrow. Similarly to Tarrow, Rucht argues that a movement is transnational 'when it is essentially composed of closely interrelated groups and organizations that belong to more than one country' (1999: 207). According to this definition, movements with very loose links, or grassroots organizations that do not have any contacts with other similar groups in other countries, cannot belong to the same movement, since there is no clear identification of belonging. Based on these paradigms, cross-national study of social movements is broadly used in social movement studies, channelled through comparative studies, which is dominated by theories of political process and contentious politics. This 'cross-national' kind of approach, intrinsically, relates the movement that appears in one country with its national tradition.

Although it definitely plays a significant role in the way a movement is instigated and perpetuated, the state is not usually problematized as a unit of analysis. In contrast to the restricted definition of Tarrow's and Rucht's 'transnational social movement', della Porta argues that what is open to discussion is the extent to which nation-states are still meaningful units of analysis (2002: 309). Following this line of thinking, Armstrong and Bernstein argue that the investigation of goals and strategies of movements gives 'opportunities for insight into the nature of domination in contemporary societies' (2008: 82). 'Domination' is here regarded as a broad concept, encompassing every form of power, derived from the state or from other cultural sources, such as patriarchy. Following this cultural turn, Armstrong and Bernstein take a distance from the political process theory which prioritizes politics occurring in relation to states, and addresses uniquely issues of economic and political disenfranchisement. Similarly, Della Porta and Kriesi admit that in today's world, where everything is interconnected, mobilization cannot be confined to the nation-state, although they admit that it continues to dominate the basic forms of organization of political life (1999: 4). We observe therefore a growing

tendency in the field of social movement studies to move beyond the paradigm of the State as the principle and unique opponent of social movements. This tendency should be considered as part of an opening up by social movement studies to cultural approaches, which view movements as not primarily preoccupied by state policies, but as arenas where culture and politics meet face to face, making the boundaries somewhat unclear.

### 2.2.3 Why multi-sited?

My study is situated within the paradigm of the cultural turn. Contrary to Tarrow's idea of transnational activism as state-oriented contention, I will use transnationalism in its broad sense, of cross-border construction of collective identities. I thus promote the idea that social movements based on cultural forms of antagonism can also adopt transnational characteristics, even though their opponent is not clearly distinct and their claims not necessarily channelled through the state or other bureaucratic institutions. Their political realm is located rather in the political imaginaries and in the new 'modes of address' (Warner, 2002) they intend to promote. A multi-sited ethnography of queer festivals' deployment will reveal mechanisms of collective action and repertoires of social movements that appear during the same period across different spaces, as well as the building of material and symbolic identifications that deconstruct the binary between state and culture.

Anthropologists have been questioning during the last few decades the dichotomy of the local and the global (Marcus, 1995: 95; Kearney, 1995). This idea, in which the global and the local are intrinsically connected,<sup>16</sup> has influenced the theorization of social science methods too. In his article 'Ethnography in/of the world system', George Marcus makes an attempt to explain why conventional single-site studies cannot account for meanings and identities, which are part of the broader global system. Although he admits

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<sup>16</sup> This idea has been popularized inside academia to the extent that many postmodern political scientists talk about the 'glocal' (Robertson, 1995)

that single-site studies have produced refined examinations of resistance and accommodation, he concludes that, in our globalized era, nothing seems any longer to be isolated and unconnected to other relations, structures or ideas (Marcus, 1995: 96). Marcus argues that:

‘Schematically posed, this paradigm concerns cases where there is very little actual contact or exchange between two sites but where the functioning of one of the sites (the more strategic one?) depends on a very specific imagining of what is going on elsewhere.’ (1999: 7)

Therefore, on the opposite stand of an ‘intensively-focused-upon single site of ethnographic observation and participation’ which does not involve the study of the world system context, there is the ‘postmodern ethnographic research self-consciously embedded in a world system’. Ethnography is described as a

‘Method which moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research [and] designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space’. (Marcus, 1995: 96)

To make things clear, a conventional single-site ethnographic study would entail analysing an event as a product of very specific structures, the most important being those connected to the state in which it takes place<sup>17</sup>. Although such an approach can

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<sup>17</sup> See the classical definition of Hammersley and Atkinson, who define ethnography as: ‘a particular method or set of methods which in its most characteristic form...involves the ethnographer participating overtly or covertly in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions – in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of research’ (1995: 1). Although this classical definition sets the basis for a schematic representation of ethnography, it describes it as a stable and fixed method, which is shaped in a very concrete way. In fact, the ethnographer is described as a person who stays outside her field of study: her main objective is just to listen, take notes and collect the data in order to produce the knowledge which she is going to transform into a scientific discourse. Furthermore, the time limit that they pose (‘extended period of time’) reminds one of the old school of ‘native’ anthropology, when researchers stayed in the research field for years, some of them turning ‘native’. Multi-sited ethnography, however, takes a distance from this narrative of the long stay in the field, for practical and theoretical reasons. Practically, because the objective of a multi-sited ethnography is usually constructed upon the study of several, not a single site, which implies that long periods of time are not always available (Falzon, 2009: 6)<sup>17</sup>. Theoretically, because

reveal social and political processes which interplay within the contemporary world system, or can emphasize the role of the state as providing a political opportunity for the development of the movement, it does not take into account the following:

- The way actors give meanings to macro-changes, and to the power relations developing between themselves,
- The complexity of the interplay of state and non-state institutions in the construction of a movement whose target is not directly the state,
- The historicity of the movement, as well as the importance of the space in which its development takes place.
- Its interactions with other movements.

By considering single-site or cross-national comparison theoretically impertinent for my study, I adhere to the idea of the methodology being intrinsically linked to the theoretical framework of the research. Method and theory are not seen as two distinct processes. Multi-sited ethnography is the most relevant method by which to study events that are not built against the state, but embrace a broader definition of the political through a transnational lens.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, multi-sited ethnography internalizes comparison within the method. According to Marcus, ‘de facto comparative dimensions develop... as one maps an object of study and needs to posit logics of relationship, translation, and association among these sites’ (1995: 102). Following this line of thought, the object of study is always mobile and ‘open-ended’ until the end of the thesis<sup>19</sup>. The research design is made up of juxtapositions of multiple sites where the object of study occurs, and therefore, the researcher is called to link the sites by exploring the material and symbolic strings which connect them. Therefore, it is by tracing these connections that the argument of the project is built.

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people, ideas and materials are viewed as connected and ‘open-ended’ rather as single, unitary, and complete.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault describes the model of politics I adopt: ‘Power isn’t localized in the State apparatus and...nothing in society will be changed if the mechanisms of power that function outside, below and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level, are not also changed’ (1980: 60)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>19</sup> In fact, I am following the course of the line of the queer events as they appear over time.

In addition, multi-sited ethnography is considered necessary in the case that the researcher wants to position herself inside the object of study. Conducting fieldwork in settings in which the researcher feels politically and emotionally attached allows a breaking of the binary between public and private, by questioning the notions of ‘objectivity’ and ‘impartiality’, through a reflexive process. Reflexivity allows for a keen awareness of ‘being within the landscape, and as the landscape changes across sites, the identity of the ethnographer requires renegotiation’ (Marcus, 1995: 112). Reflexive ethnography is able to bridge the binary between activism and academia, and to produce a number of sources of data which otherwise would not have been accessible (Shepard, 2010: 280). It allows also for an acknowledgement of the challenges of politically and emotionally charged fieldwork. I will thus not use reflexivity as a means for ‘self-promotion,’ and with the pretext of carrying out ‘good’ research. I will rather use reflexivity as a tool to signal the power differentials developing during my fieldwork, between myself and my respondents, by providing an account of their experiences rather my own (Taylor, 2010: 73). I consider it crucial to build a reflexive multi-sited ethnography, so that my personal imaginaries of how queer activism should look should not blindfold me to the ways in which queer actors and participants prefigure their own political ideals.<sup>20</sup>

#### 2.2.4 Festivals as unit of analysis- Assumptions

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<sup>20</sup> Epistemologically, multi-sited ethnography can bring important input in social movement studies too. We are used to study social movements as monolithic units of analysis, which are created through very distinct macro processes (globalization, Europeanization etc.). In addition, it is believed that social movement networks are somehow always connected in a conscious and rational way, even if they appear in a cross-national context. Finally, it is very common to examine social movements as part of a ‘national’ tradition of contention in which they appear (see ‘the contentious French’, Tarrow, 2005: 30). Although it looks reasonable that the starting point of a social movement ethnographic study would be a certain social movement organization, a multi-sited approach makes the researcher evolve her object of study in such a way that the movement is seen as part of the world system. In other words, multi-sited ethnography makes us see social movements not as separate, self-conscious unities with a start and an end, but rather as ‘open-ended’ processes, ‘semi-autonomous social fields’ formulated and renegotiated by macro-structures, social actors, and overall, by the world system to which they belong.



I chose a specific repertoire of action of the queer movement as unit of analysis: the festival. Not only is the festival another form of collective action, but it also constitutes the peak of dynamics and visibility that queer politics has reached at the transnational level. I will proceed to a multi-dimensional analysis, which takes into account four aspects of queer festivals. These aspects function as essential discursive strategies upon which the anti-identitarian identity attempts to build:

- i) The texts circulating, and emphasizing specific discourses on destabilization of identities, deconstruction of sexual and gender categories, and performative politics
- ii) Queer festivals as transnational arenas. The ‘internationalist’ character of queer politics
- iii) The horizontal organizational structures, and in most of the cases the D.I.Y. ethos
- iv) Queer aesthetics, as performed through specific cultural practices: language, food, dress.

Each aspect will be explored through a dual analysis: discourses (‘official’ written material and activists’ narratives) and practices. Each analytical category, however, is not autonomous from the other, and thus both discourses and practices will be examined jointly. The official texts are examined through the written material produced or circulating in the festivals. Here I check the discursive strategies of the festivals’ written and visual material concerning the above-mentioned topics. More specifically, I will see how queer activists promote some discourses over others, what kind of vocabulary they use: overall, their discursive strategies, which give meaning and coherence to the attempt to build their anti-identitarian collective identity. Moreover, I will check the activist practices during the festivals as they are seen through my personal engagement (participant observation) and finally I will analyse the narratives through the life histories I have conducted with a number of activists.

## **2.3 Methods of Research**

### **2.3.1 Participant observation**

Multi-sited ethnography entails extensive participant observation. I observed several of the meetings, assemblies, workshops and performances which took place in the six festivals of my field from July 2011 to May 2013. The main challenge of this study was however to be present and available 24 hours per day in the space, since festivals tend to begin very early in the morning, and finish very late in the evening, usually with a party or performances. Thus, physical exhaustion did not allow me to be fully available during the whole of the festivals. Another challenge lay in the fact that during the day, many workshops used to take place at the same time. I thus opted for the ones which were more useful for my research. Finally, my own subjective position as a sympathizer of the movement might provoke some criticism. I have to acknowledge however that the largest part of the writing process of my dissertation took place after the end of my fieldwork. I was given thus the necessary distance to the field of my research. After I closed my fieldwork, I also chose not to attend any other queer festival until the end of the writing process, in order to avoid new input that would affect the process.

I have followed traditional methods of observation: keeping notes on everything that I considered useful for my research question. I did not face particular obstacles in this part of the ethnography. I kept notes before going to sleep. The only occasion on which I took notes in front of the actors was during the plenary meetings and the assemblies. This was especially the case with the daily general assemblies and the evaluation meetings on the last day of the festivals.

I also proceeded with the recording of the opening and final assemblies of the Rome queer festival, with the approval of its organization committee. This data is explored at intervals throughout the thesis.

### 2.3.2 Analysis of Documents

One of the basic approaches of my ethnographic research was the collection of written material circulating in the festivals. I managed to collect around 30 written documents. These documents include: schedules, manifestos, posters, zines, stickers, campaigns and posters from other political events. Their analysis will show us precisely what kinds of discourses are promoted in the festivals, and how they relate to the construction of the queer anti-identitarian identity. At the same time, texts allow us to conceptualize queer festivals as arenas which foster the construction of counterpublics, as they allow us to 'incorporate an awareness of the indefinite others to whom [the texts are] addressed' (Warner, 2002: 65-66).

### 2.3.3 Life Histories- Interviews- Focus Groups

The other essential part of my research project was the collection of life histories of activists participating in the events, and these I registered on recorders. But why should studying the narratives of activists lead to conclusions as to my research question? It is argued that narratives play an important role in activism, constructing and maintaining individual and community identities (Fine, 1995), while life histories emphasize the importance of understanding 'how perceptions of the world influence action' (della Porta, 1992: 173). Francesca Polletta argues that narrative is an object of sociological analysis, which gives 'relevance to understanding neglected dynamics of collective action' (1998: 420-424). In a similar vein, I consider what I take from my roughly 2-hour interviews with the activists to be a narrative. I promote the idea of a 'narration' of their life story. As Francesca Polletta argues, the definition of the narrative is made in order to avoid confusion with the concept of the 'frame' (1998: 424); this latter being used extensively

by culture social movement theorists (Benford and Snow, 2000; Fine, 1995)<sup>21</sup>. I prefer the approach of Francesca Polletta, who makes a clear distinction between frame and narrative, since she believes that ‘frame’ is too broad a definition, and cannot really clarify certain differences occurring mainly in the way a story is narrated. Hence, she uses a four-criteria distinction between the two: the ‘function of narrative’s dependence on emplotment, point of view, narrativity, and a limited fund of plot lines’ (Polletta, 1998: 421). I will not go into detail concerning every differential aspect of a narrative and a frame. In brief, their main difference is the idea that what counts in a narrative is the form of the narration, the way the content is presented, rather than the ‘truth’ of the story itself, which is anyway usually debated (della Porta, 1992: 181). Although Polletta views frame as a very broad concept, other critics stress its narrowness, since frames are considered static and monolithic (Benford, 1997; Miethe, 2009: 138). Yet the ‘process of framing’, proposed by Snow and Benford in order to bypass the problem of the static character of the ‘frame’ (1988: 198), is still considered by younger researchers as static, rooted in the collective level, and not taking into account the individual actor (Miethe, 2009: 139).

Although it seems at first glance that life histories are open narrative interviews (Miethe, 2009: 148), in reality they are not so ‘open’ as they sound. In reality, before the beginning of the interview and after having explained its purpose, I encouraged the narration of respondents’ life stories, trying to encourage them to have in mind that sexuality and politics was a crucial aspect of my research. After a certain point of narration, however, several interviewees seemed to feel that their narration could not be important to me, thus interrupting it and asking me questions on how to proceed (ex. What should I say now?).

Therefore, after the first interviews, I elaborated a schematic guide, which I introduced every time it felt necessary. The basic guidelines were the following:

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<sup>21</sup> Social movement ‘frame’ has its origins in Goffman’s definition of ‘schemata of interpretation’ that enable individuals to ‘locate, perceive, identify and label’ occurrences within their life space and the worlds at large (Benford and Snow, 2000: 614)

- Birth, childhood, adolescence, first sexual experiences and consciousness, political awareness of the family and social background, explicit questions on the social background, political participation in adolescence, early adulthood. The social background, in particular, was addressed in the following terms: age, national background, professional occupations of parents, education, training.
- Adulthood, political consciousness raising, political activities, sexual experiences and negotiation of gender and sexual identities, connections to other political groups and/or subcultures. Contemporary social background: personal class context<sup>22</sup>, living and working conditions, relations to the welfare states of the countries they live in, profiting from freedom of movement in the European context,
- Queer activism: explicit questions on their own perception of queer activism, degree of engagement in the festival at which I met them

Life histories, it is true, could be criticized as being partial, in that the narrators reveal only the things that they want to, or that they can even create a false narrative, full of lies. My research does not focus on the reliability of the interviewees' narrations, but rather sheds light on the way they present their lives and is particularly attentive to the things they choose to say. As Ben Shepard reminds us, the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee in a long interview is 'as a jazz-like improvisation,' in the sense that the researcher uses different aspects of his own experiences in order to listen carefully, ask the appropriate questions when s/he thinks intervention is needed, and finally construct a story from the narrative of the interviewee (2010: 281).

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<sup>22</sup> I agree with Ward that theorizing class is a complex process because 'class identity itself is multifaceted. Class is a marker of wealth and income, but it also influences, and is influenced by, an individual's skills, resources, choices, food, manners, language, intelligence, education, and geography' (2003: 67). Beyond an orthodox Marxist reading of class, I promote the ideas of Bourdieu, who sees class not only as an examination of disparities in wealth, education, and professional status, but also in the tastes, skills, and connections associated with these social locations (1984). What role is played by inequalities in connections, professional skills, and aesthetic tastes – or what he refers to as social capital, cultural capital, and habitus – is the approach I adopt in my reading of class

Life histories come from interviews with people who participated in at least one of the queer festivals of my field. I attempted to diversify my sample as much as possible by following a theoretical sampling strategy (Doerr, 2009: 49), rather than the snowball technique. Thus, my focus on gender diversity was very much taken into account: cis-women, cis-men, defined as ‘individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity’ (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009: 461), and trans women and men (MtF, FtM)<sup>23</sup>. At the same time, many ‘men’ would aspire to transgenderism, through everyday dragging, or by adopting a female mode of dressing and speaking. I also tried to take into account matters of age and educational background. I tried to keep a balance between organizers who reside permanently in the place where the festival took place, and people who *travelled* in order to attend the festival. Finally, the national backgrounds of the interviewees are diverse: Poland, Palestine, France, Germany, Israel, Belgium, Italy, USA, Norway and others. All of the interviews were conducted in English, apart from Rachele’s in Rome, which was conducted in French. They were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Interviewees’ life histories reveal significant aspects regarding identity issues. Although association with the gay and lesbian identity tends to be rejected at the collective level, the same does not happen at the individual level. At the same time, their identification with the *queer ideal* is also a matter of how, and to what extent, actors incorporate the codes promoted within the events. Thus the narratives reveal neither mechanisms of radical separatism from institutional processes, nor an aspiration to build distinct utopian communities.<sup>24</sup> And this is the result of their rather privileged position regarding economic and cultural capital. This privileged position is largely observable during the interviews too. The language the majority of the highly educated respondents use in order to address the issues of queer politics is theoretically influenced, and usually enriched with academic jargon: both signs of their personal education and training.

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<sup>23</sup> Male to Female, Female to Male

<sup>24</sup> See the opposite case of identity-politics lesbian feminism of the 80s (Taylor and Whittier, 1992).

Furthermore, narratives will reveal an idea of ‘affective mobility’ connected especially to actors who travel to another country in order to join the festivals; in other words, many queers are subject to various ‘types of social, personal, professional and intimate relationships’ (Passerini et al., 2007: 3). In this type of narration, affective and political socialization plays a crucial role for participating in a queer festival. What is interesting in this case is also that this kind of socialization takes place through the transnational arena. Therefore, travelling to meet friends who live in another country, or to meet new people, can be a strong motivation.

Life histories will also reveal a specific degree of disidentification (Munoz, 1999) of many activists or participants with the queer ideal. In fact, disidentification describes:

‘The survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.’ (Munoz, 1999: 4)

Disidentification allows for a theorization of activists as subjects who find political agency through events like queer festivals by negotiating their identification, according to their own habitus<sup>25</sup>. The degrees of identification to the cultural codes promoted within the spaces vary. This negotiation is certainly not assimilationist, to the extent that subjects do not look for integration to the normative public sphere. On the other hand, by renegotiating their identities between assimilation and marginalization, festivals’ actors contribute to the building of a new collective identity, setting a primary goal to challenge dominant narratives of gender and sexuality.

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<sup>25</sup> See also Kaminiski and Taylor (2008: 63): ‘Disidentification is a strategy of transforming culture from within by taking dominant cultural symbols and working against them to critique hegemonic rules and identities and create new identities

The narrations will demonstrate how the dilemma ‘structure versus agency’ is actually a false one. In fact, it seems to melt under the pressure of theorizations, which attribute agency to subjects, through specific cultural and social processes. Rational choice is disregarded as a criterion for involvement in a queer festival. Activists and participants tend to reinvent their subjectivities through these events, through sets of relationships developed within these arenas. Social actors, on the one hand, attempt to bring into the arena oppositional discourses, but on the other hand, they are not clearly separated from the official public spheres: actors interchange between oppositional and anti-assimilationist codes.

#### 2.3.4 Focus Groups

During my fieldwork, I organized two workshops: the first in Oslo (2011); the second in Amsterdam (2012). The former focused on the relations between queer activism and academia, and the latter on the relations between queer activism and social class. These workshops took the form of focus groups and were open to all participants. In Oslo, I attempted to explore the linguistic dimensions of queer festivals. This attempt derived from the assumption that queer festivals reproduce and promote a specific set of vocabulary and linguistic codes, borrowed from queer theory and gender studies. Thus, by using a vocabulary which sets itself apart from traditional identity and linguistic schemas (man/woman, he/she etc.), queer festivals would attempt to build arenas where new linguistic codes would be displayed. As I will show in the chapter on linguistic practices, although queer activists acknowledged a certain degree of identification with queer academic discourses, there was the tendency to be eager for the use of further *queer vocabulary*, combined with a better exploration of contemporary queer academic discourses. The last wish is imagined as a possibility to invite academics to come and speak in the festivals.



The second focus group took place during the Queeristan festival in Amsterdam (2012). Its title was: ‘Queer activism and class’, and the organizers advertised it through the Queeristan website as follows:

Queer activism has been often criticized as an elitist, middle-class cultural gathering, which may reproduce already existing forms of oppression. When it comes to class, barriers might be created when it comes to issues of dressing, eating, behaving, and speaking.

The aim of the workshop is not to give lessons about anything, or to reply in any question. Its objective is rather to produce new questions, with the participation of the activists involved in the Queeristan festival.

Through a round table discussion (max. 15 persons), we can all portray our own experiences of how our different class position interacts with others. Where do we find difficulties in communicating, or where do we feel that obstacles are being created between queers? During the last part of the WS [Workshop], and based upon the things discussed before, we could direct our conversation towards the discourses of queer activism and the importance of social class as part of it. Here we can explore coalitions between queer groups and other more class-based political groups, like trade unions, Marxist, anarchist groups etc. We can bring in, once again, our own experiences from our activism. Since we all come from different geographical backgrounds, this could be a very fruitful for our own understanding of queer activism.

The organizers of the festival asked me also to provide them with a relevant picture (Appendix 1, Picture 1). The picture is taken from a miners’ strike in the UK, under Margaret Thatcher. Gay and lesbian activists supported the strike, and were present in the demonstration, holding their own banner. By linking it with workers’ struggles, the organizers made explicit the direction the workshop should take: ‘bring capitalism back’ into the politics of sexuality and gender (della Porta, forthcoming).

Although both workshops could be described as focus groups, I would like now to make some critical notes. Influenced by Touraine's concept of sociological intervention, by developments in action research and theories of 'reflexive intervention'<sup>26</sup> (Holmila, 1997), I tried to engage the participants in an integrative discussion about the relations between queer activism and language/class. The idea of organizing these workshops was to put on the table issues related to my research question, that is how the queer anti-identitarian identity is constructed, and to leave the floor open to discussions. My role would be that of moderator. What I gained from this practice was an attempt to understand my field, not from the outside, but together with the people I was working with.

I constructed a rather critical focus group intervention. This method was inspired by Touraine, but not limited to his conceptualizations. In fact, Touraine's method of intervention is built upon very concrete steps of organization. As the author defines it, sociological intervention is 'an intensive, in-depth process during which sociologists lead the actors from a struggle they *must* carry on themselves to an analysis of their own action. This process involves a series of stages that constitute the history of the research' (Touraine et al., 1982: 280) [*italics mine*].

My focus groups were adapted to the flexible and horizontal organization of the festivals. A few months before, I contacted the organizers proposing the idea of holding such a workshop. In both cases, the organizers replied in a positive way, arranging my workshop inside the festival's programme. Participation was open to everyone. Here lies the difference between the two approaches. I do not choose my participants; Touraine, however, does (Wieviorka, 1986: 160; Hamel, 2001: 347). Anyone feeling connected to these questions could participate in the workshops and express an opinion. Furthermore, the focus groups were organized to take place just once, and lasted approximately two

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<sup>26</sup> The idea behind the reflexive intervention is that the researcher questions a power relation, which she thinks should change or at least minimize inside the movement, or she observes a process and wants to clarify what it is hidden behind

hours; Touraine's intervention processes last several years (Touraine, 1978; see also Brinker and Gundelach, 2005: 368). In addition, I do not claim, in a normative way, the existence of a problem that needs to be solved ('a struggle they *must* carry'); I focus rather on specific issues concerning my research. My own 'intervention' still remains a loose focus group interview, its primary objective to collect data through collaboration with the activists.

Certainly, there are disadvantages in that one could imagine that those interested in a workshop called 'queer activism and academia' would be only the academics at festival. The experience, though, showed that this was not the case. To take the Oslo focus group as example, there were certainly academics interested in this sort of questions. But I also observed that people without university education were equally willing to share their experiences, as well as to provide input regarding the relations between academia and politics.

## **Chapter 3.**

### **Contextualizing the field**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

‘I believe in art and theory and direct action. All these combined, in my mind, create praxis. I can’t stop thinking about praxis, about how to engage in it on an everyday basis. Writing and thinking and talking and creating and doing [...] Read! Go to lectures! Rent documentaries! Go out there and raise your consciousness! Write! Make art! Talk! Get active get active get active!’ (zine *Academy VS. Activism. Theory VS. Practice*, Copenhagen Festival, 2011)

Although praxis is proclaimed in the queer festivals as positive political action, attempting to delimit one’s fieldwork is in itself another praxis. This delimitation process, or contextualization, of the field of study is crucial for the deployment of the analysis. I thus suggest three dimensions of contextualization: historical, empirical and sociological. I have divided this chapter according to these three dimensions.

The first part will contextualize queer festivals by means of a genealogic narrative. Here, I will link the queer festivals themselves to the emergence and development of queer politics in the USA and Europe after the late 80s. In this part, the alterglobalization legacy of the queer movement in Europe will also be explored, since it relates directly to the structure and organizational tactics of queer festivals. Furthermore, questions on the definition and translation of queer/queerness/queering will be addressed, by exploring the ideological legacy of queer, tracing its roots to the development of the academic discipline of queer theory.

The second part will present the case studies. I will justify the choice of the specific festivals which constitute the empirical basis for my dissertation. I will analyse the primary and secondary criteria I used for their selection, and how they connect to the

research question. I will present specifically the cities, the dates at which they took place and their names. I will also argue that their concentration in the north-western part of Europe tells us a lot about the common institutional processes which take place in that region, and affect in their turn the emergence of queer festivals.

The third part will expose the social basis of the festivals. Based upon an online survey I conducted at the Oslo queer festival, I will proceed to some conclusions regarding the sociological constituency of the participants at that particular festival. I suggest however that these findings could be generalized to the wider field. As expected, the main social basis of the events is a middle-class, educated youth. Moreover, the survey showed that the festivals present a dynamic degree of transnationalization.

## **3.2 Historical genealogies**

### **3.2.1 Emergence and development of queer politics in the USA**

Queer activism as a movement distinct from gay and lesbian politics has its roots in the USA of the late 80s. It was mainly the AIDS crisis that radicalized political trends originating from the gay and lesbian movements of the 80s. ACT-UP New York is considered the pioneer of what we could call nowadays 'queer activism'. ACT-UP, apart from its direct-action, confrontational repertoire, used a radicalized discourse attacking not only state institutions for their indifference towards AIDS, but also the conservative values of patriarchy, normality, sexism, present in both the heterosexual and the homosexual community (Gamson, 1989; Shepard, 2010; Warner, 1993). Queer Nation followed the same rhetoric and tactics of ACT-UP, by proclaiming 'resistance to regimes of the normal as an alternative to identity-based politics of representation' (Brown, forthcoming). SexPanic!, another group in New York City 'pushe[d] the limits of identitarian politics and allowe[d] for a broader pro-sex agenda by seeking alliances

based not on 'gayness', but on stigmatized sexual practices...[which] may be most threatened by the moral claims of gay conservatives' (Pendleton and Goldschmidt, 1998).

All of these groups were born in a very specific historical and geographical context. New York City provided the symbolic and material space for new forms of politics to emerge. The flourishing gay movement of that period, associated with a vibrant homosexual culture, was based on essentialist conceptualizations of gay identity, which viewed sexuality in the same way as race, and therefore tried to mobilize in the same ways as previous race-based movements had done (Murray, 1979; Corber and Valocchi, 2003: 2).<sup>27</sup> The outbreak of the HIV crisis and its conservative instrumentalization by public authorities, however, created the opportunity for parts of the gay movement to radicalize.<sup>28</sup> This radicalization process took place through an abandoning of strict sexual identifications and a move towards an oppositional identity; oppositional against the way HIV was instrumentalized by the state and the media in order to increase homophobia. ACT-UP New York opened up its membership to include heterosexual and homosexual women, HIV-positive and negative men, and transgender people.

### 3.2.2 Queer theory: The emergence of a new feminism

New York queer politics emerged in parallel with the development of queer theory within American academia and the legitimization of poststructuralist theories on sexuality. The

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<sup>27</sup> The biological determinisms of sexuality still hold a powerful authority in the USA. This essentialist discourse is built upon a clear binary distinction of homosexuality and heterosexuality. It is promoted in the official public sphere, and disseminated through the mass-culture products of American cultural industries. For a critique, see Ambrosino who claims that the biological narrative might have helped the LGBT movement at one time, but it is not necessary anymore: 'Arguing that gayness is as genetically fixed as race might have bolstered our rhetoric a few years ago, but is it necessary to argue that way now? I understand that the genetic argument for homosexuality is a direct response to the tired "You weren't born that way" rhetoric of religious people. But in my opinion, we could strip that religious argument of much of its power if we responded like this: "Maybe I wasn't born this way. Now tell me why you think that matters."' (2014) <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116378/macklemores-same-love-sends-wrong-message-about-being-gay>

<sup>28</sup> The HIV crisis was used as a pretext by the conservative mayor of New York City Giuliani to close down all private bars in which sexual actions were taking place, such as sex clubs, bath houses, porn stores etc. (Warner, 2000: 153-157)

links between queer theory and the emerging queer movement are inextricable. As Gavin Brown explains:

‘From the very beginning, the development of Queer Theory was entangled with the new breed of queer activism. There were direct overlaps in personnel between the graduate students and early career academics developing queer theoretical approaches and those strategizing and participating in queer direct action on the streets. Queer Theory was rooted in this broader radical project of contesting heteronormative social relations. In the intervening two decades, the relationship between Queer Theory and radical street-based activism has become more tenuous and more strained, but has never been entirely broken’ (forthcoming)

The exploration of the links between queer theory and queer activism is not part of the scope of this dissertation. Insights from the former can reveal however important aspects of the latter. As Gamson and Moon note, queer theory argued that ‘sexual identities, desires and categories are fluid and dynamic and that sexuality is inevitably intertwined with...power relations’ (2004: 49). In the same vein, Corber and Valocchi noted that the term ‘queer’ refers to ‘identities and practices that foreground the instability inherent in the supposedly stable relationship between anatomical sex, gender and sexual desire’ (2003: 1). In fact, queer theory suggested an epistemological rupture with the minoritarian model of identity which reigned in sociology and the humanities until the 80s, according to which ‘gays and lesbians constitute an oppressed minority similar to other oppressed minorities such as Jews and African Americans, and they have their distinct history and culture that can be traced to the ancient Greeks’ (Corber and Valocchi, 2003: 2). Scholars coming mainly from the humanities, such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedwick and Michael Warner, appropriated critically the post-structuralist, constructionist approaches of identity, put forward by mainly French philosophers, such as Foucault, Althusser, Derrida and Lacan.

The key book of this flourishing school of thought remains Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990/1999). Butler engages with feminist theory and constructionist approaches

on gender by claiming that identity is not only socially constructed, but also performative. By analysing drag performances, Butler concludes with the idea that it is specific acts, gestures and enactments that are performative, in the sense that:

‘The essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means (1999: 173, author’s emphasis)

Performativity thus is a ‘reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names’ (Butler, 1993: 2). Based on speech/act theory according to which performative is a form of speech that *does* something, instead of just describing it, Butler moves feminism one step forward by considering gender as a ‘*corporeal style*, an ‘act’, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘*performative*’ suggests a dramatic and *contingent* construction of meaning’ (1999: 177, author’s emphasis). As such, gender is ‘an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through *a stylized repetition of acts*’ (Butler, 1999: 179, author’s emphasis). Although the constructed character and performative aspect of gender is, more or less, accepted in the humanities and social sciences, Butler shook the foundations of radical feminism, by claiming that it is not only gender which is socially constructed, but also the sex, the biological/anatomical organ, the ‘raw material’ as it was described. (Rubin, 1975: 165)<sup>29</sup>. Butler claims that:

‘If the immutable character of “sex” is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gendered, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all’ (1999: 10-11)

Therefore, the radical feminist binary conception of gender as a social construction and of sex as a biological essence, ‘raw material’, collapses with the emergence of this new queer feminist wave.

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<sup>29</sup> See also, the Italian difference feminism (Braidotti) and French psychoanalytic feminism (Irigaray), which both stress emphatically the ontological division between men and women.



### 3.2.3 Diffusion of queer politics in Europe

The beginning of the 90s saw the emergence of forms of queer politics in Europe. It is argued that this diffusion of queer ideas and politics started with the creation of ACT-UP branches in several European capitals, such as London, Paris and Berlin (Brown, forthcoming). London in particular saw the birth of queer groups, mobilizing against conservative Thatcherite discourses (Bell and Binnie, 2000: 44). The prominent one was OutRage!, which drew upon the legacy of ACT-UP London and was influenced by the use of direct action protests in response to the Thatcher government's implementation of Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988), which prohibited the use of public funds to 'intentionally promote' homosexuality (Brown, forthcoming).

In the French context, ACT-UP Paris was an illustrative example of successful transnational diffusion. As Christophe Broqua explains in his analysis of ACT-UP Paris, it was the articles of the journalist Didier Lestrade, in the gay magazine *GaiPied* and the daily *Liberation*, that made the French public aware of ACT-UP New York and its actions (2005: 66). Lestrade founded ACT-UP Paris with two of his colleagues, and imported new repertoires of action onto the Parisian streets, such as die-ins (Broqua, 2005: 71). Their connections with the USA were so clear that in their first appearance in the Parisian Gay Pride of 1989, ACT-UP members had ordered their T-shirts 'SILENCE=DEATH' from New York.<sup>30</sup> Trips to New York, as well as various press articles on ACT-UP New York and ACT-UP London created the space for the introduction of this sort of anti-HIV activism in Paris<sup>31</sup>. Nowadays, ACT-UP Paris is the only significant ACT-UP organization in Europe. Although none of the abovementioned groups utilized 'queer' as a mobilizing identity, they all, more or less, created the space for a new type of politics to emerge: politics which was angry, confrontational and beyond sexual identities.

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<sup>30</sup> 'SILENCE=DEATH' was an exemplary slogan of ACT-UP New York.

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed analysis of the diffusion process of ACT-UP New York to Paris, see Broqua (2005), pp. 66-73

Concerning its ideological bases, the diffusion of queer theory in Europe was crucial to the movement. We saw previously that queer theory was a product of a very specific historical and geographical context (HIV crisis in the big American metropolises). The links between queer theory and activism at that moment were direct, since many of the queer academics participated themselves in queer politics. But the importance of queer theory did not remain limited to the USA. Queer theory quickly found its way into European academia, starting mainly in the UK, and later expanding to France, Scandinavia, Italy, adapting in each case to the local context in which it was transposed. Thus, in their edited volume *Queer in Europe*, Downing and Gillett argue that ‘queer in Europe’ does not mean a return to the French theorists who provided the underpinnings to queer’s anti-identitarian force’ (2011: 4).<sup>32</sup> The authors suggest that we see queer in Europe as a tool to describe ‘the ways in which strategies that we might call ‘queer’...are currently being implemented, discussed, taught or otherwise disseminated in a range of European countries’ (Downing and Gillett, 2011: 4). Disseminated in various academic programmes, queer theory is nowadays present across Europe, usually as part of gender studies, or as specific courses in the humanities and social sciences.

### 3.2.4 *Queeruptions* and the alterglobalization roots of queer politics in Europe

‘The funny thing is that there had been a Queeruption in Berlin [...] And I was still together with R. and he was a little a bit involved. So funny, because on that weekend that I was going on this training during Queeruption, that was a training on queer education and for example, someone gave us an introduction into queer politics. So, I preferred the intellectual approach, hearing about queer activism, instead of actually being part of it.’ (Vella, Berlin, 2011)

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<sup>32</sup> Or, as the series editor of the volume argued, we should not see queer as ‘a McDonaldizing American exportation’ but rather as something which bears ‘exciting possibilities,...not only for the development of conceptualizations of sexuality, but for broader philosophical questions too.’ (2011: XV)

Listening to the life stories of queer activists feels as if the whole story of queer politics is unfolding in front of you. Vella is an illustrative case. She was part of Queeruption Berlin in 2003 and Queeruption Sydney in 2005, many years before the establishment of the QuEar festival of 2011, when I met her. During Queeruption Berlin, she was not strongly involved, but had a contact through her ex-partner, who was on the organizing committee. It was mostly in Sydney, where she spent one year on a university exchange programme, that she got actively involved in Queeruption:

‘But I’m not sure if I knew before Sydney that *the first Queeruption was in London* and people squatted a house to party. So, the idea of linking queer activism and Queeruption with squatting, I think that was new to me in Sydney’ (Vella, Berlin, 2011)

By the end of the 90s and with the rise of the alterglobalization movement, many European and American queer groups aligned with anarchist and anti-capitalist strands of the movement (Brown, forthcoming; Portwood-Staser, 2010: 487). In 1998, queer activists coming from the anarchist scene of London organized the first Queeruption festival, which would establish an annual transnational queer gathering for the next ten years. The following extract was retrieved from Queeruption’s website in 2010, just before shutting down:

‘We hope this site will convey the diversity of queer life, identity, and politics; provide visibility for a definition of queer that confounds and contradicts the limited representation of the "normal"/consumerist model; and be an active tool for building community that recognises the differences in queerness globally’

In the 2000s, Queeruption festivals took place in different cities of the West (New York, San Francisco, London, Berlin, Amsterdam, Sydney, Barcelona, Tel Aviv, Vancouver), establishing a transnational electronic platform whose main channel of communication was its mailing list. Within this list, apart from the organizational strategies and the

actions, identity issues were debated, while topics such as islamophobia and racism were at the frontline of the discussions.

Several Queeruption festivals took place in European capitals. These events had clear links with the alterglobalization movement, which was developing during that period too. Gavin Brown acknowledges that Queeruption festivals were spaces which ‘have been inspired by the anticapitalist networks of the global justice movement’ (2007:2685). Equally, Saskia Poldervaart sees queer politics as intersecting with feminism, through networks such as the NextGeneration transnational network, which developed within the alterglobalization movement, as well as the feminist collective Karakola from Madrid, which focuses on aspects of gender, queerness, and precarity. Both collectives participated in the European social forums of London and Paris (Poldervaart, 2006: 14). Moreover, queer politics in Europe took the form of pink blocs in big demonstrations (Juris, 2008: 74), while queer groups participated in the European social forums (Doerr, 2007: 82). Membretti and Mudu acknowledge, for instance, that at the Genoa demonstration in 2001, ‘the presence of various blocks oriented towards different uses of space for demonstrating’, one of those being the ‘queer/spectacular’, was evident. (2013: 88).

Although the links between Queeruption festivals and the alterglobalization movement were more explicit, precisely because they were developing during the same period and inside the same political arenas, contemporary queer festivals have more nuanced links to that activist legacy. Membretti and Mudu’s work however will help us understand the on-going legacy of the alterglobalization movement and Queeruption in contemporary queer festivals. Membretti and Mudu analysed the way in which Italian *centri sociali* [community centres] were used as a resource infrastructure for the alterglobalization movement (2013: 89). It will become evident that the resources used by the social centres for the alterglobalization movement are the same types of resources used nowadays by queer festivals. These resources are divided in five categories:

- a. Public places (including squatted places)

- b. Social networks (including cyber-space)
- c. Decisional processes (self-management/non-hierarchical relationships)
- d. Repertoires of action (symbolic representation, collective use of space)
- e. Codes of communication (performative power, underground culture)

A closer examination of these resources allows us to perceive queer festivals as participators in the alterglobalization legacy. Queer festivals have used all these resources created and circulated over the last 15 years, in order to set up their own position within the extra-parliamentary/anti-capitalist arenas of Europe.

More specifically, I associate alterglobalization resources with queer festivals as follows:

- a. **Public places:** The organization of the festivals in squats belonging to the broader anti-authoritarian domain of their cities keeps up the tradition of autonomous and horizontal political events. The spaces are open to a ‘wider public of ‘users’,’ offering the platform for other movements’ organizations and actors to coordinate (Membretti and Mudu, 2013: 89). The organization committees pay particular attention to the creation of ‘safe spaces’, in other words there is the normative assumption that the festivals should function as places where participants would be able to express themselves without fear, threat or violence based on their gender, sexuality or other characteristic. Organizers usually achieve this without resorting to specialized professionals, opting rather for the DIY mode. Furthermore, it is also possible for participants in the festivals to reorganize the spaces on their own initiatives. Based on the DIY ethos, the organizers tend to call on participants to contribute according to their skills
- b. **Social networks:** Queer activists organizing the festivals have a considerable network capacity, both at the local and at the international/European level. Their local connections are mostly with parts of the local LGBT movement, as well as with the local anti-authoritarian/anarchist/squatting scene of the city. At the international level,

networks develop between other queer platforms and other queer festivals, through activist and affect/friendship relationships.

- c. ***Decisional processes***: At the organizational level, queer festivals have been inspired by the horizontal structures and consensual decision making ‘inherited’ by the alterglobalization movement. Queer activists themselves call this organizing mode ‘flat structure’.
- d. ***Repertoires of action***: The festival itself forms part of the repertoire of action of the local and transnational queer communities. Nevertheless, it also functions as a platform where other actions are discussed, decided on and performed, such as demonstrations, kiss-ins etc. In addition, a process of mutual learning can take place, especially within technical workshops. Examples are: bike repairing, handmade sex toys, collective cooking, dragging and other similar activities, which require technical rather than theoretical skills. The transmission and sharing of practical skills constituted a big part of the autonomous mode of organization in the alterglobalization movement (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006: 738).
- e. ***Codes of communication***: According to Della Porta, the alterglobalization movement promoted ‘values related to communication in an open space, networking, respect for diversity, equal participation and inclusiveness’ (2013: 337). This discourse on ‘inclusion’ is very much diffused and well developed within the festivals. Its application, however, can escalate into a dispute. Regarding language and other cultural practices (food, clothes etc.), these conform to the ‘performative’ character and the ‘underground culture’ from which certain alterglobalization codes of communication also derive. (Membretti and Mudu, 2013: 89)

I have presented in this part the political and ideological origins of contemporary queer festivals in Europe: American queer politics and the HIV crisis, Queer theory and the alterglobalization movement. This genealogy will help us understand later not only the

structures of the festivals, but also their political ideals and claims, as well as the discourses which circulate within these spaces, and thus the anti-identity narrative which festivals attempt to produce.

### **3.3 Case studies: Six queer festivals in five European capitals**

How does an anti-identity discourse, attacking every possible link with gender and sexual identities, succeed in mobilizing so many people across Europe? In order to answer this question, I had to identify sites which provide a home for activists to gather from across borders and put into practice their political ideals. Queer festivals fitted this description perfectly, given that they could be seen as ‘semi-autonomous social fields’, and defined as the ‘most suitable way of defining areas for social anthropological study in complex societies’, being ‘vulnerable to rules and decisions and other forces emanating from the larger world by which (they are) surrounded’ (Moore, 1978: 55).

Having limited myself to queer festivals as the site of analysis, I opted for a medium-size sample. I thus narrowed the focus to festivals which took place during a specific time frame: July 2011-June 2013, and only in Europe. This time frame is justified by the explicit rules and regulations of the department, and by the provisions of my grant. The geographical area covered is related to my own knowledge of the field, and to the greatest access I had to the sites, in terms of resources. During the fieldwork, however, more theoretical questions emerged, concerning the links between European identity and queer identity (Eleftheriadis, forthcoming). It is important to remember that queer activism has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon space, and therefore has been forced into certain historical and social contexts. The fact that queer activism is organized nowadays in various cities across Europe becomes an intellectual challenge for a social scientist, to the extent that she wants to understand the processes of ‘travelling’, and the interactions which have produced what we can call ‘queer identity’<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Although queer activism is expanding to non-Western areas as well, such as India

As has been obvious since the Introduction, my research design is not a comparative one. Therefore, a comparison of the festivals, regarding their local differences and their different national opportunity structures, is not part of the research agenda. The dissertation's interest is in the exploration and systematization of festivals' common patterns, which construct a dynamic queer movement and build a transnational counterpublic, with its own modes of address, communication and language codes. By attending selected festivals of the field, and identifying their common patterns, I would reach the conclusion that despite their local differences, queer festivals function in fact as (transnational) arenas which create a specific public: a public with oppositional ideas and identities, based on an anti-identitarian collective identity.

The first social field I identified was the Copenhagen queer festival, a large-scale seven-day event, with a brief but remarkable history in European queer circles<sup>34</sup>. Probably the longest and biggest queer festival in Europe, the Copenhagen queer festival had already created its own fans, who were following it on a regular basis. The Copenhagen queer festival seemed the perfect 'semi-autonomous social field' Moore was thinking of, in the sense of being a definable setting, embedded in the larger fields of European queer and alternative circles (1978: 55). Easy as it was at the beginning of the fieldwork, because of its size and importance, the choice of the following events posed a series of methodological challenges. Starting by elaborating on a multi-sited ethnographic approach (see next chapter), I decided to visit the Copenhagen festival and allow myself to be directed by activists to the following settings. I was led to Berlin some days later, and to Oslo a couple of months afterwards. After the end of the Oslo festival, and building on the common characteristics of the existing field, I decided to impose some criteria for the following events I would attend.

The first criterion for the selection of festivals was their self-identification as 'queer'. But this was not enough. Queer should not just be an umbrella for LGBT [Lesbian, Gay,

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<sup>34</sup> As I realized afterwards, many people from other parts of the field had visited one of the Copenhagen queer festivals. As Vella told me: 'I went to Copenhagen for my first queer festival, where I had my first sex with a woman. 2006.' (Vella, Berlin, 2011)



Bisexual, Transgender], as is sometimes the case for film festivals. Therefore, I avoided every example of the ‘queer film festivals’ that are currently spreading all over Europe.<sup>35</sup> Finally, I excluded from my research Gay Prides, even if they were given the name ‘queer’, since I was focusing on multi-day arenas, rather than on daily marches: all queer festivals I attended lasted between four and seven days. Moreover, I selected festivals which address a transnational constituency: festivals with the objective of attracting activists from abroad. Finally, I attempted to find those festivals which hold a certain importance for the anti-authoritarian scene in which they develop, and which could also be seen as representative of the most significant queer mobilizations in the five cities after 2010.

**Table 3.1** Criteria for case selection

Self-identification ‘queer’	Transnational addressees
Not film festivals	Europe between July 2011-June 2013
Not daily marches	Significance to the anti-authoritarian scene of the cities in which they mobilize

Apart from the criteria imposed, during the fieldwork, many more similarities emerged. Hence, despite their variations in terms of size and history, all the queer festivals of the field share common characteristics, such as, for instance, similar types of organization, which could be summarized as horizontal, non-professionalized grassroots organization, and therefore few resources. In the end, the field is limited to the following cases:

**Table 3.2** Case studies/Sites

City/Name	Year (Date)
Copenhagen/ Copenhagen Queer festival	2011 (25-31 July)
Berlin/ QuEAR	2011 (5-7 August)
Oslo/ Oslo queer festival	2011 (22-25 September)
Amsterdam/ Queeristan	2012 (18-20 May)

<sup>35</sup> Thus, I excluded the Florence queer festival (<http://www.florencequeerfestival.it/>).

Rome/ Da Mieli a Queer: Culture e pratiche LGBTI in movimento	2013 (4-7 April)
Amsterdam/ Queeristan	2013 (30 May-2 June)

### 3.3.1 Europeanization and queer festivals

This is the only part of the dissertation in which I will attempt a macro-structural analysis of queer politics in Europe. A first observation one could make as regards the table 2.2 is that all cases are located in capital cities, and what is more, towards the Northwestern part of the European continent, with the exception of Rome. What would justify an expectation to identify commonalities across these events and the discourses they challenge? In this part, I will identify the processes which could explain the emergence and development of queer festivals in Europe, based on theories of Europeanization.

Queer festivals' departure point is not their structurally constrained location at the economic level, but rather their production of new cultural narratives and their challenge to dominant ones. Therefore, having gender and sexuality as starting points, queer festivals attempt to challenge the idea of a stable and rigid sexual identity attributed to biological determinations. In addition, they try to situate sexual and gender identities within a broader frame of heterosexist power relations<sup>36</sup>.

Liberal gay rights, as well as the *dichotomizing binary of the two genders* (male/female), are heavily promoted within transnational and local polities. To begin with, binary gender divisions are officially part of European Union policies, in which all the countries of the field participate<sup>37</sup>. Nordic countries in particular share a common history of state feminism. What I mean by 'state feminism' is the introduction of feminism through 'state

<sup>36</sup> An assumption that was confirmed during the fieldwork was that their critique is not limited to sexuality and gender, but tries to cover other political issues, such as precarity and migration.

<sup>37</sup> Despite Norway not being part of the EU, the country participates in several EU agencies, and conforms to many legal and political regulations, among others gender equality and discrimination against sexual orientation (Ellina, 2003: 43)

politics as part of projects which aimed at the modernization of traditional societies' (Laliotou, 2007: 56). State feminism has in reality gained significant rights for women through powerful gender equality policies. The mode of this implementation however has functioned as a 'tool of political transition that marked the consolidation of modern nation-states' (ibid), and thus became the standard measure for the modern character of a state. In addition, state feminism did not push for a radical deconstruction of the sexes binary, but rather solidified the idea of an inherent sexual difference (two distinct gender identities), based on heteronormative ideology, which sees the world as divided into two, and only two, categories of people: two opposed gender categories, two opposed sexual identities (Schneider, 2013: 555).

Moreover, regarding LGBT politics, there has been developing lately an institutional tendency to include gay rights as part of the construction of the national imaginary. This process has taken the name of 'homonationalism' as a frame:

'For understanding the complexities of how "acceptance" and "tolerance" for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated' (Puar, 2013: 336)

Although the concept has been heavily criticized, especially by analyses on countries where gay rights have still a long way to go (ex. Poland, Kulpa and Mizielinska, 2011), the normalization of the gay subject and gay lifestyle has been largely integrated into the national narratives of some countries of Northern Europe, especially the Netherlands and Denmark, and with some variations in Norway and Germany. This integration/assimilation process becomes very clear in cases where the institutional far right includes LGBT rights in its agenda, trying to build an image of openness towards homosexuality. For example, the Dutch far-right party of Geert Wilders, Party for the Freedom (PVV) 'took up the cause of gays and lesbians' (Hekma, 2011: 134). The result is that left-wing parties became 'uncomfortable with the Islamophobic tone in the defense of gays and lesbians' (Hekma and Duyvendak, 2011: 626), since the argument was: We

support [ethnically Dutch] gays against homophobic Muslims. At the same time, in countries of northern Europe, homosexuality is often used as a tool of instrumentalization against ethnic minorities and non-Christian religious populations, by both the official public authorities and far-right parties and movements. Take the Netherlands as an example, again: the integration office uses images of gay men kissing in order to check the reactions of immigrants asking for naturalization (Butler, 2008: 3).

The Netherlands might sound like an extreme example of the way LGBT rights and gender politics are developing in Western Europe. Yet, it illustrates a paradigm shift regarding the institutional normalization of sexuality and gender. Although varying according to the contexts in which they develop, I see the abovementioned processes as a *transnational diffusion of gender and sexual norms*, promoted by both national polities but also by supranational organizations, such as the EU and the Council of Europe. Thus, with multi-sited exploration of queer festivals, I expect to find common movement strategies and discourses, which function as responses to common processes of gender and sexual normalization.

I assume however that in the case of the Rome queer festival, things might be a bit different. It is obvious that Italy participates in the same supranational polity of the EU and of the Council of Europe, and therefore it is exposed to the same *transnational diffusion of gender and sexual norms*. Two court decisions, Corte di cassazione civile, sentenza 4184/12 del 15/03/2012, and Tribunale di Reggio Emilia, sezione I civile, ord. 1401/2011, 13 February 2012, refer to a clash between Italian law and EU law, and question the recognition of gay marriage which was accepted in other European countries, but not in Italy<sup>38</sup>. Italy is an illustrative example of the idea that even if countries participate in the same norm-diffusion polity, institutional resistances can create real obstacles for the attribution of rights to minorities (Garbagnoli, 2013). This political reality does not however prevent queers in Rome from mobilizing on the basis of an anti-

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<sup>38</sup> Check for more information <http://www.verfassungsblog.de/en/all-you-need-is-law-same-sex-marriage-in-italian-courts-2/#.UpNzUGTwL6m>

identitarian collective identity, even promoting at the same time a more radical agenda, which goes beyond gay rights and gender equality. I assume however that their discourses are necessarily more nuanced and less polarized than those of their counterparts in Northern queer festivals, precisely because of the lack of institutional support concerning fundamental LGBT rights.

Despite local and regional differences, I would expect that common responses to gender and sexual normalization are organized, and channelled through a network of arenas in which queer activists communicate, exchange political ideas and narratives and create a counterpublic in opposition to mainstream culture, through which these normalized processes are also diffused. I believe that this *geography of queer connections* is not being formed in a systematic and bureaucratic way. Yet, it allows ideas, strategies and people to circulate, creating a regular public, through specific events: queer festivals. It is through these regular events that queer identity is built and solidified. Further assumptions will be presented in the analysis of the specific methods I have used.

### **3.4 Subordinate discourses rather than positions: Sociological indications of queer festivals**

I will now shift the focus to micro-indications, presenting the social constituencies of the festivals, as a way to complete the picture of the field. One major criticism against Fraser's conceptualization of counterpublics has been the assumption of subalternity as a structural condition necessary to produce them. In other words, she argues that the constituency of counterpublic arenas is principally made up by structurally oppressed groups or persons. In fact, Fraser wonders 'what institutional arrangements will best help narrow the gap in participatory parity between dominant and subordinate groups?' (1990: 66), sharing the impression that 'counterpublics may be institutionally secured measures for the greater participation of subordinated groups', implying that 'the alternative quality of counterpublics emerges crucially from their population by members of subordinated

groups' (Asen, 2000: 431-432). In reality, when Fraser attempts to conceptualize counterpublics, she has in mind a very clear picture of who belongs to subordinated social groups: 'women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians' (1990: 67).

As critics of Fraser show, however, what is at stake in a counterpublic is not primarily the predefined identity of the 'subaltern' location of its participants, but rather the 'discourse topics and speaking styles' (Asen, 2000: 438), or equally 'the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and the hierarchy among media' (Warner, 2002: 86).

My analysis of the data collected from the queer festivals can confirm the reading of counterpublics not as an arena composed by subordinated groups or people, but rather as an arena in which 'some ostensible members of a subordinated group may have attained positions of privilege in relation to their cohorts' (Asen, 2000: 439). In this sense, a double trend is observed. First, the large majority participating in the festivals would seem to assert a certain degree of identification with non-heterosexual identities, thus making them susceptible to subordinate positions because of their sexuality. Second, the large majority has acquired privilege through other social processes, such as schooling inheritance of economic capital. There is finally a minor trend of actors with a lower social position because of their economic background and the intersection of other discriminated identities. Typical examples of such a trend are working-class transgender people and unemployed mothers.

In order to confirm my observations on the social basis of participants, I decided to conduct an Internet survey after the end of the first half of the fieldwork. The survey ran for two months, from October to December 2012, and it gathered 26 responses from a population of 125 participants (Facebook group of the Oslo queer festival of 2011). I used the Oslo festival of 2011 precisely because of its small size, and the probability of attracting more respondents. I posted the link on the festival's Facebook page, which directed the respondents to the electronic platform<sup>39</sup>. The response percentage

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<sup>39</sup> I used the SurveyMonkey survey platform

corresponds to almost 1 out of 7 participants in the festival, since according to the organizers' calculations, the maximum peak of the festival reached 200 people.

I consider the sample satisfactory for the assumptions I presented above. The most illustrative indication of the survey relates to the social background of the respondents. Thus, 74% replied that they came from families which would be associated with 'middle-class'. 14% replied that they came from upper middle-class families, while only 12% claimed to come from lower middle-class backgrounds<sup>40</sup>. Thus, the assumption of queer festivals as spaces which attract mainly middle-class youths is confirmed by these results.

Concerning the actual financial situation of the activists and the participants in the festival, 52% asserted they worked part-time, 32% worked full time (40 hours and more per week), and only 12% were not employed and not looking for job. The remaining 4% declared themselves unable to work due to issues regarding physical disability. We see a continuation of financial stability, explained by middle-class family background, combined with the high employment rates that Norway presents, since no respondent claimed to be looking for a job. Concerning the quality of jobs, the question was open. Thus, respondents identified themselves, giving their own titles to their jobs. According to the results, I regrouped them into eight categories:

High-Skilled profession (Manager, Advisor, Consultant, IT architect)	21.7%
Student	17.4%
PhD researcher/Researcher	17.4%
Low-Skilled profession (Bartender, Janitor, Bike mechanic)	13%
Care/Social Worker	8.6%

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<sup>40</sup> The question was posed in this form: 'How would you describe your family's monthly income when you were 17 years old?'. The possible replies varied between seven categories, based on the average income per capita as provided by OCDE's Better Life Index (<http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/norway/>)

Artist	8.6%
Teacher	4.3%
Volunteer	4.3%

High-skilled tertiary jobs account for more than 80% of the total respondents. On the contrary, lower skilled jobs, and people who failed to reply account for approximately 20%.

The educational position of the respondents is equally illuminating. To the question ‘What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?’, 60% of the respondents affirmed that they held a university degree at the time of the survey. Among these, 36% held a bachelor’s degree and 24% a post graduate degree. The high level of education serves to verify the observation of the high cultural capital of the participants in the festivals.

Concerning the geographical background of the respondents, 50% declared that they were born in Norway (Oslo holds half of the responses), 42% in some other European country, and 8% in a country outside Europe. Concerning their actual permanent residence, 64% lived in Norway (most of them in Oslo), and the remaining 36% in other European countries. Predominantly young (96% were between 21 and 39), more than half of queer participants at the Oslo festival were between 21 and 29 years old (56%).

Since the sample is taken from Oslo, the results concerning professional stability cannot be automatically generalized to the other queer festivals, especially in those cities where a high degree of youth unemployment is structurally constraining, such as in Rome or in Berlin. We could however be more confident in generalizing the results with reference to family background and cultural capital acquired through education. The abovementioned interpretations do not contradict the findings on the alterglobalization movement’s constituency. Thus, according to Gobbille and Uysal’s analysis of the European Social Forum (ESF) in Paris, its participants were in the majority young (less than 35 years old),



holding a high cultural capital, and profiting from a relatively stable professional position (2005: 107).

### **3.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has exposed the contextual setting of the festivals. Queer festivals in six European capitals of the northwest and the south of Europe constitute the research field. The events took place between 2011 and 2013. They are the product of a historical legacy. This legacy traces back to the end of the 80s in the USA, both on the streets and in the universities. On the streets, it started as a contestational movement against the homophobic, HIV-cowardly policies of the state. This contestational movement materialized in the first instance in the organization ACT-UP, diffusing later to other smaller sex-positive, confrontational groups, such as SexPanick and QueerNation. With regard to universities, the emergence of a new theoretical trend, queer theory, provided the ideological base for this new movement which was developing on the streets. In sum, queer theory proclaimed the performative character of sexual and gender identities, opposing their binary construction, making a major breakthrough in the feminist and the gay and lesbian movements of that period.

Queer politics was quickly diffused to Europe and took on a dynamic character through ACT-UP organizations, which were set up in a series of capital cities. The peak of visibility however was reached inside the alterglobalization movement of the 2000s. Based on the model of Membretti and Mudu (2013), I have argued that the set of resources which established the alterglobalization movement in Europe, coincides with that of queer politics, confirming the queer legacy within the alterglobalization movement of that period. Moreover, the alterglobalization movement, transnational by nature, created those networks that would later be used to establish transnational queer politics across the continent.

In addition, the queer and alterglobalization movements' common history connects with their similar social basis. Based on the online survey I conducted in 2012, I have shown that the main ground of queer festivals is composed by a middle-class, highly-educated youth. These results are not very far from the parallel findings on the alterglobalization movement. This social constituency is subjected to the processes of Europeanization, since many foreigners who live in the cities where the festivals take place participate as members or attendees. Festivals are equally subjected to transnationalization, since many people travel in order to attend the events.

The significant finding from the survey relates to the degree of 'subordination' as assumed in the theories of 'subaltern counterpublics'. The subordinate status of queer festivals is located in the oppositional discourses, which circulate within the spaces, rather than in the structural positions of the activists or the participants in the events. The reification of practices that perpetuate a middle-class ethos, as well as the relatively high educational and intellectual capital of the activists does not allow an idealization of the queer events as spaces in which structurally subordinated subjects create political antagonisms. Furthermore, the common processes of Europeanization of gender and sexual diffusion make queer festivals part of this whole idea, even if they are located on the counter-side of this political process. Gender and sexual norms and identities have been historically homogenized in this geographical area through public authorities (Foucault, 1969). Europeanization of sexual politics tends to shape similar views of fixed homosexual and transgender identities, which are promoted through regional and European policies. Queer festivals are thus not totally disconnected from the state or the official public sphere. Their search for emancipation from state power, and from gender and sexual identities is precisely what shapes their prefigurative ideals and their organizational forms.

The contextualization I have attempted in this chapter is crucial to the degree that it represents the raw material of the dissertation. Methodology will reveal however how this

raw material was used and analysed, and which processes I followed in order to answer the research questions. The next chapter is dedicated to this analysis.

## Chapter 4

### The organization of queer festivals: Horizontality, Do-It-Yourself and Counterpublics

*'Deliberate decision making or rule following 'is never but a makeshift aimed at covering up the misfirings of habitus' (Bourdieu 1972: 205)' [Wacquant, 1992: 24]*

#### 4.1 Introduction

*August 4, 2011. Berlin.*

*Four days before the QuEar festival begins.*

*I go to the Schwarzer Canal squat to help people set up. The Schwarzer Canal lies on the old border of the two Berlins, on the east side. There are trees all around the squat. It is the first time in my life I have seen such a thing. The Schwarzer Canal is the place where the QuEAR festival will take place. It is a squatted area inside a forest occupied by queer-identified persons who live inside train coaches. Squatters follow the 'wagenplatz political tradition', a guy tells me. 'What does it mean?', I ask him. He says that some queer people from the Berlin left scene moved train coaches in this area and transformed them into living spaces. Each coach hosts one person usually. There are also a couple of coaches used as common rooms or exhibition spaces. These moving coaches are now scattered across the squatted forest area. The squat is identified as:*

*'A queer community project, and wagenplatz, currently based in a patch of woods in eastern Berlin, Germany. As such, it is a networking, coming-together point for queers and friends and part of a wider network of autonomous spaces of squats, wagenplatz in Berlin, Europe and beyond.'*<sup>41</sup>

*The first QuEar DIY festival will take place here. I ask one girl to tell me the idea behind having such a festival here. According to her, the idea started from three*

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.schwarzerkanal.squat.net/Project.html>

*friends who wanted to organize a sound festival with queer perspectives. Since they already had close connections with the queer squatters of the Schwarzer Canal, these three friends decided to organize their festival here. The squatters of the Schwarzer Canal offered a part of the squat to the festival. The agreement was to provide the festival with seven of their coaches, together with the main entrance. People are not allowed to stay overnight however. Therefore, the coaches offered were only used as spaces in which the sound installations would be set up.*<sup>42</sup>

Part, usually, of the broader left-wing scenes in their cities, queer festivals are organized within squats. This mode of organization allows for a prefigurative ideal to take shape. By putting in motion a set of organizational practices which are linked with the squatting ethos, such as horizontality and DIY, queer festivals function as prefigurative spaces in which their oppositional identity can emerge.

Squatting being one part, a series of other organizational mechanisms needs to be promoted and implemented in order for queer festivals to build this oppositional identity. DIY is one of those strategies, as the Copenhagen queer festival's slogan '*Do-it-yourself. Do-it-together*' (2011) reveals. Queer activists promote and put into practice a DIY way of organization, despite the multiple obstacles, raised before, during and after the events. But Copenhagen was only one of the festivals to engage with this specific organizational choice. DIY was the basic mode of five out of six festivals I attended between 2011 and 2013.<sup>43</sup> Part of a broader horizontal, anti-hierarchical culture of organization, DIY's promotion is manifested even in festivals' callouts. At the discursive level, it usually has an inspiring and celebratory tone, while, in practice, its implementation raises several logistical and ideological controversies.

In this chapter, I will start to unfold the picture of how queer festivals attempt to build arenas which construct transnational counterpublics. These arenas are structured and function according to specific organizational practices. I consider queer festivals'

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<sup>42</sup> Field Notes, Berlin, August 2011

<sup>43</sup> Rome had a more centralized mode of organizing

organizational practices crucial for the understanding of how their proclaimed anti-identitarian identity becomes materialized. Above all, the modes of organization of ‘solidarity groups and new social movement organizations stress the prefigurative role of participation as a “school of democracy.” (della Porta, 2013a: 333). Informal social movement organizations with a radical agenda of claims and multiplicity of actors, experiences and identities tend to organize horizontally, defending more ‘participatory and consensual visions of democracy’ (della Porta, 2013b: 338). In order therefore to see what the anti-identitarian idea of queer festivals signifies, we need to scrutinize the logics of organization and acknowledge its contribution to the construction of the collective identity.

Moreover, turning the attention to the organizational practices will allow us to further explore the idea of the kind of publics festivals want to shape. I bear in mind that ‘it is not texts themselves that create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time’ (Warner, 2002: 62). In the case of queer festivals, the regular reiteration of their anti-identitarian stance leads, paradoxically, to the generation of a new identity, a belief-oriented one, which sets as its target a move beyond strict gender and sexual identifications. These counter-conceptualizations of identities are even more persuasive once they become part of a broader political practice, which needs to suggest *new styles* of doing politics. I claim that festivals’ specific organizational choices and the way they are promoted and implemented have as a *goal* the reinforcement of a sense of belonging to an *oppositional* group, which can be translated into a sort of collective identity. Identity should be seen here in its Butlerian/performative sense of the term, achieved through ‘a stylized repetition of acts’ (Butler, 1988: 519). Therefore, by viewing the organizational processes of the festivals as repetitive acts which reinforce the conception of queer as an oppositional identity, we can extend the understanding of counterpublics, not only as assemblages of texts, but also as the result of the repetition of specific political practices. In other words, we could understand festivals as ‘scenes of self-activity, of historical rather than timeless belonging, and of active participation rather than ascriptive

belonging’ (Warner, 2002: 62). It is thus their agency, manifested in their active involvement of the actors, which makes festivals realizable as counterpublic arenas.

The following ideas on the agency of counterpublics will be extremely important to the extent that they can reveal the limits of the dichotomization between *prefiguration* and *strategy*. It is usually agreed that these ‘two terms are commonly understood to be either antonyms or complementary to each other, but nearly always as two separate or contradictory movement practices’ (Maeckelbergh, 2011: 2). Prefiguration, therefore, could not be seen as strategic, since it does not include the traditional idea of ‘organization’, as defined by the social movements of the left of the 70s and 80s. As Polletta claims, ‘to be “strategic” was to privilege organization over personhood and political reform over radical change’ (2002: 6). Strategy is usually conceived therefore as an essential part of a hierarchical organization, prefiguration, in contrast, as being without goals and merely cultural. Many cases reveal however that, especially after the alterglobalization movement, practice should be understood as a reflection of its goals. Polletta (2002: 199) argues that participatory democracy has a ‘normative’ aspect in which ‘participatory democratic decision-making is at once a means and an ends’. Furthermore, movements with oppositional discourses and repertoires of style are not only seeking to intervene within dominant public spheres; they are also challenging representative democracy, in part by developing their own ‘directly democratic forms of organizing and decision making’ (Juris, 2008a: 295). Seeing queer festivals as arenas in which counterpublics emerge allows us therefore to conflate the dichotomous binaries between prefiguration and strategy.

In this chapter, my aim is to analyse the extent to which the organizational practices of queer festivals contribute to the construction of a sense of belonging to an oppositional group. Moreover, I will make clear how this identification fits with the creation of publics which promote new discourses and styles of performing politics. For this analysis, I use evidence from my ethnographic fieldwork on queer festivals. I take into particular account all those processes which build the prefigurative character of the events, such as

assemblies; their oppositional character, manifested mostly through DIY practice, and their realization into the squatting scenes; and finally the performative/reiterative character, which gives a sense of regularity to the events, and constitutes thus the basis for the development of a collective identity. During this analysis, opposition to the implementation of these organizational practices will be revealed, evidenced through participants' accounts, and my personal participation in the field.

I have divided this chapter into three parts. In the first part, I will make an overview of the theoretical debates which have been taking place in social movement studies relating to the organizational dilemmas on horizontality, and their links to deliberation and prefiguration. In the second part, I will analyse the role of the squat as the space in which most queer festivals take place, the organizational strategies of horizontality and the DIY ethos, in the building of the festivals' anti-identitarian identity. I will show how these organizational strategies are part of the broader queer prefigurative project and how they relate closely to the movement's self-imagination as 'counter', including an anti-authoritarian, feminist and egalitarian ethos. Therefore, the following dimensions will be taken into account:

1. The space as a setting for a counterpublic to emerge
2. Its horizontality as a prefigurative strategy of the organization committees; The DIY character as a specific mode of relating to prefigurative politics.

The third part of the chapter will address the internal controversies that the organizational practices reveal. Through personal accounts and public expressions of the activists, I will see how the building of a prefigurative space always remains incomplete. In reality, however, it is the strategic use of prefiguration as a goal for the building of the oppositional identity that allows for the construction of oppositional publics.

## **4.2 Organization in prefigurative spaces**



According to della Porta and Diani, one of the main organizational dilemmas within social movements is that of choosing between hierarchical or horizontal structures (2006: 142). The term ‘horizontality’ in particular refers to ‘an increasingly widespread mode of political organizing characterized by non-hierarchical relations, decentralized coordination, direct democracy, and the striving for consensus’ (Juris, 2013b: 40). Hence, the question of centralizing or diffusing the power within a social movement organization or a political event needs to be considered. Questions of internal democracy, avoided until recently, are gaining increasing interest within the social movement literature, especially after the relevant transformations they have undergone, such as the innovative forms of networking, the diversity of subjectivities participating, and the experimentation on ‘possible utopias’ (della Porta, 2013b: 337). These transformations are even more visible within the alterglobalization movement of the early 00s, where actual queer networks too had their origins.

Horizontal political experiments have been seen by scholars through basically two lenses: a. the Habermasian model of deliberative democracy and b. Gramscian emphasis on counter-hegemonic struggle (Juris, 2013b: 42). While the former sees the events as ideal places where rational-critical debates can be held and decisions can be taken (Fraser, 1992: 30), the latter stresses a more agonistic form of political struggle, in which extra-rational or communicative actions can expand the democratic scope (Mouffe, 1999; Warner, 2002; Young, 1996). These actions include, among others, body politics, emotional pluralism, affective communication.

Queer festivals are situated in deliberative forms of organization, combined with a promoted emphasis on affective communication. In their effort to construct a community out of the norms where deviancy is celebrated, queer festivals act out their utopian ideals. In other words, queer festivals function as prefigurative spaces, to the extent that the ends they want to achieve ‘are fundamentally shaped by the means’ they employ, and so queer actors ‘choose means that embody or ‘prefigure’ the kind of society they want to bring about’ (Leach, 2013: 1004). The deployment of the festivals within a time period of three

to seven days allows for temporary experimentations attempting the creation of ‘an alternative organization of life based on care and solidarity’ (Della Porta, forthcoming: 103). We should not see ‘prefigurative’ however as synonymous with utopian. Queer festivals are not radically isolated from social life, neither do they perform marginalization, as we see in subcultures. Festivals are well embedded within the squatting scenes of the cities in which they take place, but also in other transnational networks. Many of the organizers and the participants share affiliations with the broader social struggles of the urban and transnational context in which they live (see Chapter 5).

The main question to ask when examining prefigurative movements is that of ‘how the commitment to aligning means and ends affects political practices’ (Leach, 2013: 1004). In other words, the links between the prefigurative ideal and the ‘real’ political practices should guide the analysis. For that reason, I take into account the spaces in which queer festivals take place, together with two sets of ritualized practices of the festivals’ organization: the committees and capital assemblies, both of which embrace the DIY ethos.

### **4.3 Space, horizontal DIY festivals and the construction of queer counterpublics**

#### **4.3.1 The space of the festival as the arena**

The QuEar festival took place during the first few days of August 2011. Its name, QuEAR, is intended as a play on the words *Queer* and *Ear*. The festival was mainly composed of sound installations scattered over different parts of the Schwarzer Canal squat. These installations were displayed inside the coaches made available for the festival by the squat’s residents. As expressed in its name, they were all centred on sound, and its political implications for queers. By sound, the organizers did not limit their ideas to music, but tried to include every sound mechanism relating to hearing, such as radio

programmes, audio documentaries, artistic sound installations, interactive sound games and live sound performances. The organization of the QuEar festival within Schwarzer Canal is an illuminating example of the inextricable links between queer festivals and the squatting scenes of their cities. The squatted spaces function as the base upon which the discursive, organizational and cultural practices of the festivals are constructed. They provide a strong cultural identifier, since, although a distinct urban movement (Lopez, 2012: 867), they have always held connections with other movements of the broader political field, such as anarchists, anti-authoritarian, punk, and DIY scenes. Therefore, the squats function as crucial markers for the oppositional identity queer festivals attempt to promote, and thus for the style of politics they want to advance.

Queer festivals are organized in different types of squatted spaces. Some of them have a longer history in the local political context, while some others are newer. Some of them take place in the centres of the cities, others a bit further out. The Berlin festival was organized at Schwarzer Canal, in a location a bit further from the city's alternative centre, Kreuzberg. The Oslo festival was organized in Hausmania, an artistic squat in central Oslo, whose building belongs to the City Hall. At the same time, many festivals tend to scatter their activities around the city in a number of different squats. In this case, they usually have a central squat, which functions as the 'headquarter' in which the daily plenaries take place. The two Queeristan festivals in Amsterdam were held at the squat Op de Valreep in the east side of the city, mostly migrant-inhabited areas. Many of the festivals' activities have been gradually removed since 2013 to two other squats in the centre of the city: Vrankrijk and Slang. Finally, the Rome queer festival took place mainly at the Teatro Valle, which is an occupied public theatre in the heart of the city. Many of its activities were also decentralized. The parties, for instance, took place at the squat Angelo Mai, and the closing plenary took place at the Acrobax squat. The only exception was the Copenhagen festival. This festival was organized in a building belonging to the City Hall, which the activists rented for a lower price than usual. The building was located next to the central railway station, a working class area with a high number of homeless and drug-addicted people.

**Table 4.1: Pubic places where queer festivals took place**

Copenhagen	Rented municipal building
Berlin	D.I.Y. queer Squat
Oslo	Urban squat
Amsterdam 2012	Urban squat
Rome	Urban squat
Amsterdam 2013	Urban squat

Although these spaces look different at a first sight, their inclusion within an urban setting<sup>44</sup>, their location within already existing highly politicized spaces, and their internal work in order to fit with a queer prefigurative ideal can be seen as one of their common patterns. The last common characteristic, particularly promoted by festivals, is described with the name of ‘safe space’ for participants, who feel threatened or excluded<sup>45</sup>. Moreover, the preexisting personal links between the organizers of the events and the squats play a crucial role for the realization of the festivals inside them. These links could vary in their intensity, but they allow the arrangement to take place in a much easier way. As Casimiro from the Rome queer festival explains, the links between his organization, Queer Lab, and Teatro Valle, the squat in which the festival took place:

‘Concerning the relations with us [QueerLab], our relation is really depending on one person at Teatro Valle [He tells me the name]...She was totally supporting the festival... In Bologna she was in a feminist collective. The relation with Teatro Valle is a very good relation, even if it depends on some people, but it’s something not so strange in general in Roman politics, it’s something very common. You wait to have

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<sup>44</sup> The importance of the city as a welcoming space for queer activism was visible, although not openly discussed in the festivals. For instance, of all the queer festivals organized in Europe in 2011, only one was organized in the countryside, the Queertopiafestivalen in Norberg (Sweden). The urban character of DIY festivals is not always compatible with what we know from DIY politics in the ‘90s. *Earth First!*<sup>44</sup> was founded around the rural and grand narrative of Western individual freedom, while British DIY groups in the ‘90s sought to reclaim the countryside (Mckay, 1998: 29-31)

<sup>45</sup> The organizers and the participants throughout the festivals and for their whole duration continuously stressed the idea of ‘safe space’. Depending on the context, they were focusing on potential ‘unsafe invaders’.

a relation with a place through one person. If that person is not there, it's a big problem. So, personal relations, yes, but not because we're friends, [but more] as a contact' (Rome, July 2013)

Lee, one of the organizers of the QuEar festival in Berlin, explains in a similar manner:

'It was not such a close contact. I mean I know people from there, living there or used to live there, friends, or people I know from scene, or we performed there too, or I helped them in a shift in another festival, but... nobody of us lived there or lives there'. (Berlin, August 2011)

Squats function as the arena for the festivals' prefigurative ideals to take shape. Previous networks between the queer organizers and the squatters allow the realization of the event inside the squats, by facilitating the logistical arrangements. The squat is transformed into a temporary 'convergence space' which will host the festival and its participants, many of them coming from abroad. In other words, the squat becomes the space in which participants 'embody their particular places of political, cultural, economic, and ecological experience with common concerns, which lead to expanded spatiotemporal horizons of action' (Routledge, 2003: 345).

We should therefore see the squat as a temporary convergence space, which will allow the prefigurative vision of the activists to be realized. This vision should not be limited however to the utopian imagination of a future ideal society, but more as 'a participatory way of practicing effective politics' (Routledge, 2003: 345), fertilized with an 'experimentation with another form of democracy' (Della Porta, forthcoming: 119). Therefore, such a space sets in motion the construction of the queer identity. At the same time, it helps in shaping the collective actions of the event by reinforcing its ideals through the ritualized practices of the festival, which I will explore in the next section.

#### 4.3.2 Ritualizing the festival: organization committees, assemblies and the DIY ethos

i) *Organization committees*

Although the organizational logic of queer festivals is horizontality, all of them are organized around a ‘committee’. The committee is basically composed by activists who reside permanently in the city where the festival takes place. The committee members meet regularly several months before the festival begins. Apart from their physical meetings, part of the communication takes place through mailing lists or Facebook pages, but also through friendship networks, since many among of the activists have already established various types of affective relationships.

The role of the organization committees in the festivals is not to form a ‘revolutionary vanguard’, which would seek to ‘seize existing power structures and implement revolutionary change’ (Leach, 2013: 1004). Its role is rather to facilitate the realization of the prefigurative model that festivals desire to implement. Although organization committees generate and sustain emotional ties among their members, there is a deliberate opening to new, unknown potential members too. All queer festivals (apart from that in Rome) invite new people to become members of the organization committees through their callouts (see Chapter 4), diffused usually in mailing lists and social media, months before the festival starts. The members of the organization committees (old and new) gather several months before the beginning of the festivals to discuss technical and logistical details. For instance, according to its members, the Copenhagen festival took place in July 2011 after a year of regular meetings by its organizing members, which began straight after the end of the 2010 festival.

Participating in the organization process of the festival requires certainly a lot of energy and time. Having no direct institutional support, and lacking large amounts of resources, queer actors need to dedicate a lot of their personal time for the realization of the event. Despite these difficulties, people who participate in the committees find their motivation

through strong emotional ties with other members. These ties function as affinities, which can help sustain festivals across time, but they can also produce internal contention, especially after months of intensive, exhausting work. In both cases, strong interpersonal ties provide the basis for construction of collective identities (Routledge, 2003: 340).

Socialization with people sharing the same political ideals, but also the same lifestyles, is a major motivation, described by almost all of the interviewees who participated in the organization processes of the festivals. Both national and foreign locals in the city see the organization committees as arenas of socialization. Tobin describes his own experience when he became part of the Queeristan's committee in Amsterdam:

*'I immediately liked all the people. Because they're all, rather they're gender queers, my first understanding of what non-normative genders, what they look like. I felt directly at ease with them...I was struggling very hard to find a way how I could be productive part of the group. But, I had a great time'* (May 2012)

Other activists participated in the organizing committees in order to support their friends, which also makes part of the broader socialization processes. Vella's story from Berlin is an illustrative case:

'Last year, I heard about this [the QuEar festival] for the first time, cause I know Christian. Christian actually, he was on the same bus on the way to the queer festival in Copenhagen, and we met him there, and we got to talk, and Jane met him there and...Lee was also in Copenhagen. So, you know, 5 years ago we already, we hung out together. And, Christian works at this radio station and he produces radio features, he's into this kind of stuff, he said he wants to do this audio festival. And I thought, oh, that is a good idea, and Lee then started to organize it with him, and in this early spring, they said, we need more people to help us and to do all the work. And I said I don't want to do any conceptual work, I don't want to do organizing or think, but I want to help you as the festival comes closer. And this is what I did. When it came closer, they said we need someone to organize the building of this big

Ear, the entrance, I said, ok, I can do that. So, I got into the group of the [Qu]Ear’  
(Berlin, August 2011)

Socialization functions equally for foreigners who moved to the cities to study, or for professional reasons. These mostly European (and American to a lesser extent) migrants see the organization committees of the queer festivals as primary socialization arenas in their new life. Zoe describes her own experience. She attended the organization preparations of the Copenhagen festival with one of her friends, who had also moved from Poland:

‘[I met the committee] In February [2011]. Maybe one or two weeks after I moved [to Copenhagen]. And we just went to Ana’s [a member of the organization committee] apartment, without knowing anyone, and we just said: ‘Hey, can you speak English? We are from Poland; we’d like to do the queer festival. With you’. And they started to speak English. I mean, at first they switched to Danish very often, but then we were like coughing’ (Copenhagen, July 2011)

Giacomo also saw the organization committee of the queer festival as a space to make friends in his new life in Oslo:

‘I wanted to be more active, so I wanted sort of come out more, to be more present, and of course this is connected to the fact that *I’m new in the city, so I also wanted to sort of to get to know people*, and settle down, that was also part of it. And then when I got in touch with them [the organization committee], they mentioned that there was a regular meeting, taking place and I had seen that also on Facebook.’  
(Oslo, September 2011)

Socialization is usually combined with positive feelings. Activists tend to describe their emotions by attributing a sense of happiness. Zoe’s narration is an illustrative example:

‘I can’t even express *how happy I am* that I was preparing this festival. Maybe the preparing the festival wasn’t like the most important thing, but I liked our seminars,



when we had these political discussions, about separate space, and racism and stuff. And it learnt me so fucking much. I've never been, I've never felt I'm learning so much in such a short period'. (Copenhagen, July 2011)

Zoe relates her happiness, among other things, to the idea of 'mutual learning'. She felt very inspired by the fact that she had the opportunity to listen and to discuss issues such as racism, for instance.

Although happiness and friendship can be motivating factors for engaging in the organization of the queer festivals, they are not sufficient to avoid conflicts and controversies, or feelings of exhaustion, which appear during the events, as we will see in the second part of the chapter. In addition, these emotions of happiness, enjoyment and socialization constitute parts of broader emotional communication, which de-idealizes rational arguments on involvement in social movement politics. To come back to Giacomo, he links being tired and happy as a necessary condition of being a member of an organization committee:

'So I went, I think, to three of the meetings, which is weekly meetings, and then through the meetings I got more involved in working as a volunteer, and *that I felt very happy* that I've done that, because it's precisely what I needed. *It's physically tiring* but...it sort of satisfied the need I had...of do[ing] something, be active and not just, yeah, complain, there's nothing happening' (Oslo, September 2011)

Similarly, Vella from Berlin acknowledges the time someone needs to dedicate as a member of the organization committee:

'I got into the group of the [Qu]Ear. And generally the festival took much more time than I thought. Then because I had to do my PhD, but then again it was so nice to be outside on the Schwarzer Canal building this ear.' (Berlin, August 2011).

Therefore, socialization becomes a crucial factor for becoming a member of the organization committee of a festival. This motivation applies to both the ‘natives’ who are already embedded within the local scenes, and the ‘migrants’, people who have moved to a new city and want to socialize with people sharing the same political beliefs and cultural attitudes. Foreigners, in particular, willing to participate in the organization committees form part of what is called ‘tactics of European socialization’ (Ayoub, 2012: 25). Similarly to what I will demonstrate in Chapter 5 regarding the exploitation of transnational networks in order to broaden the geographical scope of the festivals, foreigners already residing in the city use links with the left scenes as a tactic to enhance their own socialization.

*ii) The structure of the festivals: Assemblies, workshops, performances, DIY ethos*

A basic feature of queer festivals is their daily assemblies, during which the organizers present the issues and the schedule of the day, and the participants comment on, make suggestions and criticize the events of the previous day. The assemblies can take place either in the morning or in the afternoon, depending on the festival’s schedule. The assemblies are also the opportunity for DIY festivals to build their sub-committees. The sub-committees are organized around a specific function of the festival. Thus, sub-committees for cooking, cleaning, night shifts and other activities are organized during the daily assemblies. They are a unique opportunity for organizers to encourage participants to become more active by getting more involved in the organization of the festival. Cleaning issues are particularly stressed, due to the numbers of people and the constraints of the space.

Another main organizational feature of the festivals is their workshops. They take place throughout the whole day, while sometimes they might overlap, when there are many of them, and the time constrained. Workshops vary from the theoretical and ideological to more practice-oriented. Some examples of the former category are: ‘Queer anarchism’,

‘Masculinities and the bear culture’, ‘Metrosexuality’, ‘Queer and class’, ‘From precarity to the commons’. A recurrent theme of the theoretical workshops is the relationships between class /race and queer politics. Regarding the practice-oriented workshops, they include some of the following titles: ‘DIY dildos’, ‘Diva workshop’, ‘Eyes wild drag’, ‘Bike repairing’, ‘BDSM’. As becomes obvious, the practice-oriented workshops focus mostly on issues of sexual activity. The workshops are organized either by one person or by a group, and these organizers are usually appointed weeks before the festival. People or groups willing to organize a workshop usually contact the organizing committee, after the latter has diffused the callout through social networks. The organization committees always have the last word on the workshop proposals.

Performances constitute another basic aspect of the events, and they usually take place in the evening. Performers are either invited by the organizers in advance, or they apply directly to the festivals, similarly to the workshops organizers. They vary from those relatively famous in the transnational queer scene (it is not unusual to see the same performers in different festivals) to those more amateur, and younger. The Brazilian performer group *Solange, tô aberta!* (STA!), for instance, based in Berlin, performed in Copenhagen and Oslo<sup>46</sup>. Sex parties, although not part of every festival, should get special attention due to their close links with the whole idea of queerness. Part of the broader performative styles of queer festivals, sex parties sustain the alternative character of the events, by prefiguring a new mode of expressing sexuality. Two out of six queer festivals organized a sex party. Finally, collective cooking and eating constitute one of the main practices, providing the festivals with regularity.

By the end of every festival, the assemblies take the form of ‘evaluation meetings’. During these meetings, organizers and participants discuss the development of the festival, stressing both the positive elements and the pitfalls. There have been cases when intense conversations took place, usually when participants dwelt more on their negative experiences of the festival. To sum up, the final plenaries/evaluation meetings are a very

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<sup>46</sup> For more information on the group and their queer political perspective, see Hutta (2013)

illustrative example of solidification of the collective identity of the groups through the expression of emotions, and in building common projections for future actions.

The assemblies and the final evaluation meetings provide the festivals with a certain organizational regularity and allow them to function as traditional ‘deliberative spaces’, as inherited by the alterglobalization movement and performed through World and European Social Forums. They reflect the horizontal logics within the organizational architecture of the festivals (Juris, 2013b: 42), while at the same time representing the ‘place par excellence of an open and (in principle) egalitarian space’ (della Porta, 2005: 337). In that sense, one could say that they conform to the Habermasian model of a ‘discursive public sphere’ (Calhoun, 1992: 1). This is partly true, although the ideas tend to be formulated in a more personal experience-oriented narrative, reaching a communicative model of deliberation, as we will see towards the end of the chapter.

What is important to stress at this point however is that the regularity of the above-mentioned practices gives a performative character to the festivals, which helps to reify its oppositional identity against more hierarchical and institutionalized forms of organization. Festivals’ repetitive organizational practices, which become ritualized through their repetition, function as a ‘reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established’, becoming the ‘mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation’ (Butler, 1988: 526). In other words, the daily committees, the night performances and the workshops legitimize the importance of the queer festival, affording the participants a specific sense of ‘queerness’, a feeling of belonging to an alternative community. I will demonstrate below that this identitarian experience becomes even more intense with the promotion and implementation of a set of DIY discourses and practices.

The specificity of the queer festivals is limited not only to their horizontal organization, but also, and in most cases, to their DIY character and ethos. DIY is a label given by activists to those political events which promote a non-hierarchical form of organization

and decision-making, and which attempt to deconstruct the binary between organizers and consumers, as two distinct entities. It has its roots in the punk subcultures which rejected, at the beginning of the '80s, the idea of collaborating with major music labels; they expressed themselves through non-commercial networks and self-organization (Poldervaart, 2001: 151; Nicholas, 2007: 1). In that sense, it is the DIY practice which seems to contribute most to the construction of a 'counter' identity, less than the communicative practices of the assemblies and the workshops.

Indeed, historically, the DIY principle has been associated with an 'autonomous anarchist ethos', which considers that people participating in them should do as much as possible themselves (Nicholas, 2007: 1). Thus, several countercultural scenes in Europe which have been influenced by anarchism, such as squats, are linked to the DIY culture. Saskia Poldervaart describes the DIY scene of the Netherlands at the beginning of the '00s, for instance, by providing four representative examples: the squatter movement, the broader alterglobalization movement, punk subculture and animal rights groups (2001). All these four movements have developed a collective identity inspired by this 'anarchist ethos,' and present similarities to the extent that they develop their actions and sustain their collectivities through a DIY idea and practice. According to her, 'Do It Yourself' stands for each individual's designing his own life and taking initiatives, without expecting the political or social institutions to do so (2006: 8). Older queer politics, close to the squatting/anarchist scenes, had also been part of the DIY culture. Gavin Brown acknowledges that queer activism in the UK in reality was 'infused with a creative, 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) ethos that prefers thrift-shop drag over the latest designer labels' (2007: 2685).

Regarding queer festivals, DIY is very extensively promoted through the official discourses of the festivals. The QuEar festival at the Schwarzer Kanal in Berlin promotes its DIY character through its official programme, by dedicating one full page to the Schwarzer Kanal squat. Taking the squatting project as departure point, the writers gave their own definition of DIY:

‘Schwarzer Kanal operates according to the DIY principle: Do It Yourself! The idea is that there are no bosses, no masters and no one comes just to consume. Everyone who uses the space helps to keep it running. Whether that be by doing the washing up after a meal, doing a barshift during a concert, helping to tidy up after a party, doing press work, or realizing your own ideas for an event...There are lots of possibilities!’ (QuEAR festival, 2011)

The Copenhagen festival, similarly, placed the DIY character at the centre of its political discourse. The main poster publicizing the festival, on the walls of the city of Copenhagen, took the following minimalistic form: a black background with white letters saying: ‘Do it yourself, Do it together’. Below the slogan, it displayed the place and the dates of the venue. These street posters constituted the main source of information about the event for the inhabitants of the city, as usually happens with other events of the left scene around Europe<sup>47</sup>. Moreover, going into the building where the festival was taking place, one could find a pack of one-page brochures with the title in English ‘Do it yourself; Do it together’, the logo of the 2011 festival. We read in the brochure:

‘DIY doesn’t just mean that you can make anything you want out of the festival, it also means that everyone must run the festival. This means actual work for everyone [...] And someone else cleaning up after you is just another boring, oppressive division of labor’ (Copenhagen Queer festival, 2011).

The Copenhagen queer festival has a long history in DIY politics. By checking the posters of its previous queer festivals, the DIY character becomes inextricably linked, even synonymous with its queer part, by using the discursive pattern of X=Y: The Copenhagen queer festival *is* a DIY festival. The 2008 festival poster, more colourful than that of 2011, portrayed the DIY letters at the top of the image of the poster

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<sup>47</sup> As in the case of Berlin, ‘to find out what is ‘really’’ going on..., one does not read the newspapers, one reads the streets’ (Leach and Haunss, 2009: 263)

(Appendix 1. Picture 3), while in the 2007 poster, DIY was simply one other aspect of the festival, along with the workshops, music and performances. (Appendix 1. Picture 4).

The main programme of the Oslo festival in 2011 followed the same pattern. In the graphics on the first page of the programme, the hand holding the 'OSLO QUEER' banner mentions D.I.Y., together with 'Workshops' and 'Films, live music'. It is tempting to give a short visual analysis of this: the hand holding the OSLO QUEER banner can be seen as a visual metaphor for the festival itself. Since DIY is one of the three hands of the picture, it would not be unreasonable to imagine that DIY is an essential constituent of the festival. As explained on the Oslo queer festival's *Myspace* webpage:

'The DIY/DIT (Do It Yourself/Do It Together) means that by sharing and volunteering we all make the festival together. It makes performers, audience and organizers equals. Everyone participates and everyone is included. We make the festival by ourselves and for ourselves because we want to.'<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, the repetition of such celebratory discourses on the DIY character of the festivals quite explicitly points out the political ethos of the events, seen as a central tool for the sociological constitution of a field. By stressing their DIY character, festivals reinforce their opposition to the commercial, mainstream culture. At the same time, they attempt to link discursively to other similar subcultures, located in the anarchist and squatting scenes. Finally, the 'Do-It-Yourself' narrative encourages participants to get an 'active uptake' in the event; this active engagement of the participants, as 'somnolent' as it might be (and we will see in the next section that it usually is), is indispensable for the construction of an oppositional public, addressed through, among others means, its distinct political practices (Warner, 2002: 61).

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<sup>48</sup> <http://www.myspace.com/osloqueerfestival>

#### **4.4 What is queer with the organization? Negotiating the differences**

Although queer festivals tend to organize according to a very specific mode, which contributes to the construction of a public with oppositional political styles, it is interesting to examine how activists and participants experience these organizational practices. This micro-level analysis, characteristic of an ethnographic observation, becomes relevant when we need to analyse the interactions and the emotions, which together attribute a specific meaning to the collective identity struggling to emerge during these political events, as well as to the ‘emerging subjectivities’, or ‘sites of liberation and foci of tension and conflict’ (Juris, 2013a: 18). Beyond Habermasian logics of rationality, I acknowledge the importance of emotional communication (Young, 2000) in emotionally charged spaces, such as queer festivals. In other words, taking into account that the emotional culture of a group is equally, if not more, important than arguments (della Porta and Giugni, 2013: 123), will help us reveal the building of queer festivals as counterpublic arenas.

In this part, I will examine how festivals’ specific organizational structures, promoted and enacted through discourses and practices, reach their own public, and how they are subsequently transformed through that public’s personal experiences. I will also pay particular attention to the controversies they reveal. Similarly to any other convergence space, queer festivals function within ‘a penumbra of differences, conflicts and compromises’. (Routledge, 2003: 346) These controversies are evidenced through activists’ narratives, which reveal the difficulties at the events in deconstructing the dichotomies between organizers and participants, so heavily promoted through festivals’ official discourses. Other stories relating to the communication of emotions will be particularly illuminating. In the end, however, it will be demonstrated that it is precisely these controversies which solidify the identity of the festivals, by strengthening its emotional energy (Della porta and Giugni, 2013: 126-127).

Back in 2011:



*Copenhagen, 30 July 2011.*

*Last day of the festival. Evaluation Meeting*

*Jenny raises her hand. 'I really like the festival. It is a very precious moment when we can create a community and create a new world' - her positive words were really moving. 'But when you create this new world, please do not forget people with disabilities'. Everybody then realized the point of Jenny's intervention: her short but substantial complaint was made on behalf of people like herself with physical disabilities.'*<sup>49</sup>

The above story is illuminating as to the way negative emotions are expressed in queer festivals. Not only did Jenny participate in the festival, but she was particularly active. Although not officially part of the organization committee, she participated in the cooking, cleaning, and night-shift work. She was really trying to engage actively with the practical arrangements of the festival, despite her visible physical disability.

The assemblies, which take place on a daily basis in the queer festivals, allow for a communicative space to be created. Part of the feminist legacy, assemblies allow for expression of opinions, often accompanied by the narration of personal stories, built upon individual experiences. Storytelling plays a particularly important role in creating bonds of solidarity (della Porta and Giugni, 2013: 135), thus contributing to the internal identity-work of political groups. One such story was presented by Jenny during the final assembly of the Copenhagen queer festival in July 2011. Copenhagen's queer festival took place in a public building, offered by the municipality at a low price. The building had two floors, and there was no elevator. Moreover, in the callout of the festival, there was no warning for people with disabilities that they would not be able to move to the upper floor. Jenny's intervention was very relevant to the extent that it revealed the limitations of the organization of an event, which cannot control every possible problematic issue that can emerge during the event. Legitimate as it was, Jenny's claim

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<sup>49</sup> Field Notes, Copenhagen, July 2011

found a very specific channel to express her disappointment. One of the main features of the festivals' daily routine are the daily assemblies (or plenaries), in which people commit to a communicative debate, traversed by the feminist idea of sharing experiences and emotions. Jenny's complaint about lack of disability politics inside the festival was made during one of those assemblies, making the whole festival constituency realize the extent of non-awareness regarding such issues. Jenny's account contradicts as well the inclusive narratives that queer festivals so liberally portray in their discourses.

Jenny's story is one about 'contested social relations', place-specific parochialisms that reinforce inequalities in the convergence space (Routledge, 2003: 346). Interestingly however, the way these contested social relations are channeled allows actors to express personal experiences in open assemblies, in which everybody is invited to participate. Through the assemblies, people are encouraged to suggest new ideas, making possible processes of transformation of collective identities, and the rise of political consciousness. Not only do contested social relations not cause the disintegration of the political event: they in fact contribute to the articulation of its oppositional character.

On the other hand, the whole function of the festivals on horizontal, and usually DIY mode, is far from ideal. Organizers try very intensely to encourage participants to contribute to the function of the festivals, in order to achieve the ideal of do-it-yourself=do-it-together. Part of their broader identitarian imaginary (see Chapter 4), queer festivals are based upon an *autonomous* political economy in order to sustain themselves. In that sense, autonomy signifies independence from commercial, capitalist ways of production and consumption, as the Copenhagen festival's callout stated: 'We wish to create a space, which is not based on money, as we find this is the case in society today'. For the success story of such a prefigurative project, heavy workloads need to be taken on, and many participants need to be ready and willing to intervene when needed. In reality, there are several participants who engage in the setting up of the infrastructures and installations, take care of the facilities, and contribute to the cleaning process. What is more, it is these same participants who tend to respond to the appeals for night shifts,

which are organized for security reasons; they man the info desks, which are usually located at the entrance of the squats; and they then become barwomen/men every night. Meals are provided through dumpster diving in big supermarket chains<sup>50</sup>, or by offers from local commercial shops, that need to be picked up by participants. This whole autonomous political economy of the festivals can become particularly exhausting for the members of the organization committees.

In her interview, Zoe, member of the organization committee of the Copenhagen festival, compares the queer event to the punk festival of Dortmund, in which she had participated as an organizer too:

‘I also have the experience of making the DIY festival in Dortmund, which is also a DIY festival, but is organized in a different way. But everything is like prepared beforehand, all the concerts, and workshops. *I was also in this orga [organization] group* and we had like overview on what is happening and we’re making up the decisions. And there were people who were volunteers, sign up for shifts and shift checkers, so it was a DIY, but in another way’. (Copenhagen, July 2011)

Zoe’s account on DIY derives from her position inside the organizational structure of the festival. This level of engagement has been consolidated in a ‘dispositional adjustment of actors in the expectations of the institution’ (Yon, 2005: 141), as well as in the feelings of connection that she has towards the event.

The promotion of the DIY ethos, as expressed through the discourses of the festival, and contributing to ‘together-ness’, is challenged by the failure of the festival to deconstruct the boundaries between the organizers and the participants, or ‘consumers’. This ‘consuming’ attitude is confirmed by Vella too, a member of the organizing committee of the QuEAR festival in Berlin. To the question ‘Which is the critique that you make of

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<sup>50</sup> Dumpster diving is a term ‘used for obtaining items, in this case food for consumption, from dumpsters’ (Eickenberry and Smith, 2005: 188)

queer activism in Berlin? What would you like to see happening in the next few years?  
she replied:

‘You say critique. I would say I don’t have a critique cause I don’t feel myself as the group. What I would like to see... more people doing organizational voluntary work, *there’s too many people who just consume*. It’s always the same people, so last night, I was really glad to see there were new people’ (Berlin, August 2011)

Although Vella initially claims that there is no critique to make, after a few seconds, the lack of people helping in the work of the festival comes immediately to her mind. The same reflection comes from Zoe in Copenhagen:

‘And I am a bit pissed that people are not taking the shifts, and you have to force people, and you have to explain why it is DIY, why you should clean up after yourself, after others, and maybe I would like this to be more steep, to be shift checkers.... And I like about this festival so fluid, and so flexible, and so open that you don’t know what might happen here, because this is the people that create this festival, and I like this idea way better, but *I still think that people could or help a bit more, to be smarter on what it means to do something DIY*. You know, just care more.’ (Copenhagen, July 2011)

The way Vella and Zoe narrated their experiences reflects a general complaint from the organizing members, who feel very often overloaded and exhausted, since they bear the heaviest load of responsibility. According to them, a big majority of participants are unwilling to take on nightshifts, or any tiring and boring duty, even if they know that the queer festival works on a DIY basis. Furthermore, the lack of volunteers from the side of the ‘consumers’ is believed to lead to a decrease at the level of security, as gaps in security checks and night shifts are not fully covered.

Both Vella and Zoe have been part of autonomous politics (queer, antifascist, punk) for many years now. The similarities in their stories of lack of involvement on the part of the

participants is due to their, more or less, similar position inside the hierarchical structures of the festivals, and the social ties they had already developed there, which made them part of their organizational structures. The common feelings they share are part of their exhaustion as members of the organizing committee, because of the workload that such positions entail.

Exhausting as it might be for the members of the organization committees, the functioning of the festivals feels much more enjoyable for the participants. Participants in the festivals usually express more positive feelings, compared to those shared by the organizers. Robin was interviewed in Copenhagen, where he was invited to speak about queer politics in Palestine. Robin belongs to the organizational core of the Queeristan festival in Amsterdam. His narration sounds spectacularly different from Zoe's and Vella's:

*'It's wonderful [the festival]. It's good for me to come and see it here in Copenhagen, not being part of the organizers because having Queeristan in Amsterdam, being part of the organizers, being always tensioned about what's happening and we need everything to work out well, I did not sit there and enjoy it. And I was, it was my first queer festival, even to organize, not only attend, but also organize. So, I did not have, I had a different idea that everything needed to be very controlled and now I come to Copenhagen and I see that things are more relaxed, and the do-it-yourself concept is, I think, working well. (Copenhagen, 2011)*

Three points can be taken from Robin's account:

- As a consumer, he finds the Copenhagen festival 'wonderful'
- He is not as anxious as he is in Amsterdam, as an organizing member of the festival there
- The DIY mode in Copenhagen 'works well'

The difference in the experiences that people have as organizers and as consumers is evident in Robin's account. The work overload is a given in every festival, and every

account I gathered from the organizing members reconfirms this. Moreover, the differences in the way organizers and ‘consumers’ perceive the same festival is relevant:

Table 4.2 Differences of perception, Copenhagen festival, 2011

Zoe (organizing member): ‘And I am a bit pissed that people are not taking the shifts, and you have to force people, and *you have to explain why it is diy*, why you should clean up after yourself, after others’)

Robin (participant): ‘and now I come to Copenhagen and I see that things are more relaxed, and the *do-it-yourself concept is, I think, working well*’.

The difference in the perceptions between Zoe (and Vella in Berlin), on the one hand, and Robin on the other, has to do more with their different positions inside the hierarchy of the festival and the tasks that each of them is supposed to fulfill. Hence, Zoe and Vella, who participate in the organizational structure of the festivals, view DIY as a ‘consuming practice’ for some activists, while Robin seems to enjoy it.

In the end, we realize that the emotional differences in the experiences between the organizers (frustration, exhaustion) and the participants (enjoyment) reveal the limits of such political endeavours to completely erase the barriers between the two sides, in spite of the celebratory discourses of the festivals on DIY, and the continuous attempts of the organizers to make participants more active within the function of the festivals. This discontinuity between the promoted horizontal, usually DIY, ethos and the material difficulties in implementing it, creates conflicts which can generate tensions within the festivals. Disappointment is revealed through the interviews, as far as emotion is concerned, and participants refer to the present as something that should not be reproduced. It could be said however that this sort of negative emotion is expressed not so much within the assemblies, as in the interviews and informal talks.

We could say that the assemblies function as spaces in which the expression of emotions is promoted; however, in most cases, it is only the positive emotions which find their place for expression. This is not to say however that negative emotions, such as exhaustion, are not discussed within the festivals. But they are rather part of informal rituals, tending to be diffused through friendly discussions, as is the case with other informal, horizontally-oriented political groups (della porta and Giugni, 2013: 133).

## **4.5 Conclusion**

Queer festivals act as prefigurative spaces, in which the non-hierarchical ethos needs to reflect significantly, both in the discourses and the organizational practices. Therefore, horizontality is presented as a basic constituent of the events. It usually takes the form of a DIY practice and is presented as a basic identity marker of events' decisional and organizational processes. In reality, horizontality connects queer festivals with past and present social movements based on self-organization, linking them to the horizontal ethos of the alterglobalization movement. Furthermore, the DIY practice, in particular, connects queer festivals with other scenes of the autonomous left, manifested in the realization of the festivals within the squatting scene of the cities. Georges McKay argues that 'the construction or reclamation of space, with its attendant problems, is a central area of action and concern in DIY culture' (1998, 28).

The specific strategy to organize the festivals in public places, mostly squats, functions as an a priori identity marker. By selecting squats as the places in which the festivals take place, organizers set the bases for a horizontal ethos to emerge and to be processed into an oppositional identity, manifested in the anti-identitarian work queer festivals attempt to build. Although squats tend to limit the number and the kind of people who visit them, they help however to solidify a distinct, oppositional identity, by providing the basis for a 'convergence space' to emerge (Routledge, 2003).

Concerning in particular the DIY practice, I have demonstrated that it is not only an organizational mode, opposed to hierarchical forms of organization that can be attributed to more 'institutionalized' social movements. It rather contains a specific ethos in the sense that it marks out its difference and its 'radicalism' in relation to mainstream society and social movements (Brown, 2007: 2685). In order for this ethos to transform into an oppositional identity, it needs to be promoted intensely through discourses, but also to be practised through repetitive acts. Thus, DIY is portrayed in the discourses of queer festivals as very solid, coherent and radically inclusive, whereas a closer observation proved that it is experienced in a variety of ways, depending mainly on the hierarchical positions of its members. Members of the organization committees tend to express frustration and feelings of exhaustion, compared to the participants (or 'consumers') who tend to find it more enjoyable. I attributed this difference in perceptions of the DIY practice mainly to the failure of the events to deconstruct the binary between organizer and participant/consumer, which stands as the main target of DIY practice.

I showed, however, that despite the logistical constraints of such a project, and the lack of financial resources, DIY horizontal queer events offer the possibility to their participants, even as consumers, to express feelings and emotions which emerge during the festival. Regular assemblies and plenaries give possibilities to both organizers, and participants to communicate their feelings. Organizers usually complain about the lack of involvement of the participants, while participants tend to express more personal frustrations and disappointments, making visible existing inequalities, connecting with the idea of 'communicative democracy'.

This experience-oriented form of deliberation continues the legacy of the feminist movement, which actually queer politics claims to be equally part of. Therefore, I see the assemblies as arenas of 'communicative democracy'; in other words, spaces where 'the principle of inclusive listening, understood as the collection and exchange of narratives' is promoted (Doerr, 2007: 85). Queer festivals stand in-between deliberative and



communicative forms of organization. At the same time, their prefigurative character is reflected through the specific organizational practices which constitute the events.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, DIY is an indispensable way to keep the festival's oppositional identity alive. It is primarily used as a discursive strategy in order to attract people identifying with the 'anarchist ethos' of the concept. In fact, any organizational structure other than the DIY one would imply a neglect of horizontal structures. This is an important feature to take into account because according to the festivals, DIY is more than a way of organizing; it is, rather, a resistance to commercialization and the hierarchical structuration of political events and activities which has taken place during the last few years in the field of institutionalized politics. Even if this is not mentioned explicitly, queer festivals are trying to closely associate with DIY in order to dissociate themselves from conventional, 'apolitical gay politics' (Brown, 2007: 2686), and hence to politicize their own event even more. The promotion of DIY holds a normative function for queer festivals.

Looking closely at the queer festivals, we see an emphasis on the idea of 'together-ness'. The practice of DIY aims at 'equalizing' the organizers with the participants through horizontality. By minimizing the differences between the two sides (organizers and consumers/participants), the discourses of the festivals align with the idea, extensively circulating within the squatting/extra-parliamentary urban circles, of an 'egalitarian way of life' (Leach, 2013: 1005), which can be achieved differently than through a representative mode of organizing. Hence, the repetition of slogans such as 'Do it yourself; Do it together' stresses, and thus reaffirms, the links to the left-wing extra-parliamentary scenes, especially those connected to anarchist scenes, as is the case with other oppositional movements (Leach and Haunss, 2009; Poldervaart, 2006).

I argued in this chapter that it is the intense and repetitive promotion of the DIY ethos that solidifies a specific identity construction, reflected in the organizational practices. It is this ethos which helps crystallize a form of collective identity through a stylized

repetition of acts. Aligning with the idea of Butler on performativity, I saw how the specific organizational tactics on horizontality and the repetition of specific militant practices, such as the daily assemblies, the workshops, and the evaluation meetings, contribute to the queer identity-work, embodied in the counterpublics that are created in the festivals. This identity is not just a matter of circulation of relevant texts, but is also performed through specific repetitive militant actions.

Concerning the discursive part, there is a set of speech acts widely diffused and broadly displayed in all festivals, emphasizing the ‘together-ness’ of the events. Hence, next to the ‘Do it yourself’ part of the discourse, there is also the ‘Do it together’ part, visible in the official texts. What is the difference between these two parts of the slogan? Although Do-it-yourself politics may be seen as individualistic, placing more emphasis on the individual rather than on the community, at least at the discursive level, this is not the case. As McKay reminds us, ‘maybe we should be talking less of Do It Yourself than of Do It Ourselves’ (1998: 27). In the end, it is the ‘together-ness’, which allows a queer collective identity to emerge. A queer identity linked to the DIY ethos.

Discourse, however, is not sufficient in itself to sustain and solidify a collective identity. A set of specific repeatable practices is a necessary condition for activists to experience ‘together-ness’. Performativity, apart from its discursive side, holds the idea of repetition of acts, which give meaning to the queer counter-identity by solidifying it. It is mainly the ritualized daily practices and their stylized character, such as the communicative assemblies, the workshops, the evaluation meetings and the performances, which account for the construction of a political queer identity. The regularity of these micro-events within the festivals shapes the solidification of belonging, while it allows the participants to discuss various issues and experience collective emotions, not always through harmony and without controversy. At the same time, an active uptake is necessary for participants to enter the ‘threshold of belonging’ (Warner, 2002: 61). By becoming active members of these prefigurative spaces, participants develop their links to the queer ideal and give meaning to the events’ and personal identities.

## Chapter 5

### What is ‘queer’ about queer festivals? Identity-building through narrative practices and collective actions

*The body is an agent, not a resource (Haraway, 1988: 594)*

*This circulatory space, freed from heteronormative speech protocols, is itself marked by that very suspension: speech that addresses any participant as queer will circulate up to a point, at which it is certain to meet intense resistance (Warner, 2002: 86-87)*

#### 5.1 Introduction

*Sunday 25/09/2011, Last day of the Oslo queer festival  
Oslo, Hausmania Squat  
17.00*

*[In the Courtyard] We are about 7 people smoking. ‘This is the difference between queer theory and activism. Theory tries to deconstruct identities, whereas here we are building an identity: We are all queer!’ Luca, a Norwegian trans man, very active in the organization of the festival, attracts my attention. Queer theory and queer activism? Interesting. I wonder. ‘I have done gender studies’, says Nikolaj, a Danish performer visiting the festival. All the others shook their heads. It seems that it is only me and Nikolaj, who have studied gender at University.*

*[...]*

*[Inside the building] Some people are preparing handcraft and drawings on a table. Some others are painting on white T-shirts. One participant makes a drawing on a T-shirt. She is sketching a multiple-choice quiz with the following options to: 1. Man, 2. Woman, 3. Fuck Gender, with the third option ticked.*

*[...]*

*I start talking with Kaja, one of the 'leaders' of the festival's organization. She says: 'If we start talking about real politics inside the festival, half of the participants will go away. Some others however ask me why we never discuss politics. Last year, I prepared a workshop called Queer feminism. I had no idea what it would be about. So, I show up, and say: I have no idea what queer feminism is. Let's discuss it. But in the very end no one takes Oslo Queer seriously. Neither the left, nor the gay community, nor the radicals.'*<sup>51</sup>

These field notes describe what happened in a period of two hours during the last day of the Oslo queer festival. They are illustrative of the way identity issues are discussed within the spaces, and the styles of politics they attempt to address. This identity crisis of queer festivals ('no one takes Oslo Queer seriously'), and the struggle to position them within the political sphere through identity-building work ('Here we are building an identity: We are all queer!') will help answer the questions that this chapter will pose.

Almost twenty years after Joshua Gamson's publication on the 'queer dilemma' (1995), queer politics has not yet managed to escape from these identity debates. As Gamson claimed in the mid-90s:

'Queerness in its most distinctive forms shakes the ground on which gay and lesbian politics has been built, taking apart the ideas of a "sexual minority" and a "gay community," indeed of "gay" and "lesbian" and even "man" and "woman."' It builds on central difficulties of identity-based organizing: the instability of identities both individual and collective, their made-up yet necessary character. It exaggerates and explodes these troubles, haphazardly attempting to build a politics from the rubble of deconstructed collective categories. This debate, and other related debates in lesbian and gay politics, is not only over the content of collective identity (whose definition of "gay" counts?), but over the everyday viability and political usefulness of sexual identities (is there and should there be such a thing as "gay," "lesbian," "man," "woman"?')

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<sup>51</sup> Field notes, Oslo, September 2011

Promising as it sounded back then, queer politics today traverses the same, albeit more complex, identity dilemmas. Issues of transnationalism, anticapitalist protests, financial crisis, increasing precarity, coalitions with other social movements, recognition of gay rights in the West, regression in other parts of the world. New parameters have enriched queer politics with a developed identity repertoire, yet this remains fragmented and anchored in ‘dilemmas’.

This chapter will proceed to unfold the identity-building process of queer festivals, by moving the discussions beyond the ‘dilemma’ position. As is obvious, the dilemma position entails ‘debates’ over the content and the political usefulness of identity. These debates presuppose rational actors with very specific ideas on the content of the discussions. Queer festivals will reveal however another type of identity-building work. I will demonstrate that identity ‘debates’ function less at the rational-critical level, and more at the cultural-practical level, depending on the modes of addressing the political; in other words, the styles of performing politics. This style is manifested both in narrative practices but also in collective actions. By locating identity-building in both aspects, it will be necessary to reconsider the relations between counterpublic theory and collective identity studies. Although the concept of ‘counterpublics’ has been theorized, and is entering gradually into social movement literature (Calhoun, 2012: 152-180 ‘The reluctant counterpublic’; della Porta and Rucht, 2013: 9), we still do not have wide empirical evidence of how such counterpublics contribute to identity-building work.

This process of queer festivals’ identity-building work will be investigated by analysing a set of discursive and activist practices: narrative-building and collective actions. The discursive practices are relevant to the extent that they help us understand how actors organize speech, speech sequence, how they relate to each other, and the conventions and narrative genres that are applied by the festivals. Moreover, through their collective actions, festivals’ actors reinforce a feeling of being different by celebrating, albeit confrontationally, their distinctiveness vis-à-vis mainstream audiences (Bernstein, 1997). A systematizing of these practices will reveal the identity processes that take place

among festivals' members. The sample will be based upon ethnographic and written material I gathered from all queer festivals. I distinguished three analytic categories, in which identity-building presents its most dynamic and challenging characteristics: (a) the anti-identity narrative, (b) gender/sexual performativity and performance and (c) autonomy and the politics of the commons.

The chapter begins by making a brief theoretical overview of the debates on the above-mentioned characteristics, and a clarification of relevant concepts, and I continue by analysing the discursive text of the *callout*, a short piece of text intended to draw attention in social media, examining the role this plays in the pursuit of publicizing the event and attracting participants, and also in shaping the collective identity of queer festivals. The callouts of all festivals will be discussed in this part. The chapter moves on to discuss the awakening of a queer collective identity, engendered by participation in performative collective actions and theatrical shows and explores too, in the fieldwork, the unexpected directions that awakening can take. Two sets of performances in particular will be used as illustrative examples, both from the Queer festival in Rome: the Slutwalk and an internal show from a performance group. The next section evidences the application of autonomous discourses to construct the outlines of a queer collective identity, and the use of those discourses to connect with the anti-authoritarian squatting scenes of the urban settings in which festivals take place. A workshop on the politics of the commons, which took place at the Queeristan festival in Amsterdam in 2012, will be used as evidence of this discursive trend of queer politics, which is currently developing in Europe. The chapter will close by showing how all these identity-building characteristics (anti-identity, performativity, autonomy) rearticulate an oppositional public, which seeks to engage with issues of collective identity in terms of alternative political practices and prefigurative imaginations, rather than with concrete, rational-critical, policy-oriented concepts.

## **5.2 Queer and Identity: Theoretical insights**

I begin by providing essential theoretical insights into the debates relating to the characteristics of the queer identity, as they were commonly identified in all festivals: (a) the anti-identity narrative, (b) gender/sexual performativity and performance and (c) autonomy and the politics of the commons. In this part, I will also define some crucial concepts for their understanding. The theories of Michael Warner on ‘publics and counterpublics’, which inspired Fraser’s basic critiques of rationalizing arguments, and social movement studies inspired by these ideas, will be of deciding importance for the understanding of the identity-building work of queer festivals.

Warner’s theories will illuminate those characteristics of the festivals which make them arenas for counterpublics to emerge. Conflicts of the counterpublics extend ‘not just to ideas or policy questions, but to the speech genres and modes of address that constitute the public and to the hierarchy among media’ (Warner, 2002: 86). In other words, counterpublics challenge speech genres and styles, and they do not ‘always conform to the bourgeois model of ‘rational-critical’ debate’ in the Habermasian sense of the term (Warner, 2005: 51). A counterpublic is an autonomous ‘space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself’ (Warner, 2002: 50)<sup>52</sup>. Regarding social movement literature, the model constructed by Verta Taylor and Leila Rupp (2003) on performative politics of drag queens in American cabarets constitutes a useful tool with which to explore the role of body politics and performance, in the challenge of rational-critical debates over identities.

### 5.2.1 The anti-identitarian frame: Revising identity politics?

Queer politics keeps alive a legacy of more than thirty years of anti-identitarian politics. The debate is rather undecided. Although the queer frame tends to emphasize the

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<sup>52</sup> Or as Paolo Virno claims, discourse ‘constitutes in itself an *event* consisting of itself, which is justified solely by the fact that it happens’ (2004, 90- italics of the author)

destabilization and the fictitious character of personal and collective identities (Gamson, 1995), it has not been able to overcome the paradox which it constructs itself. As evidenced in Chapter 1, social movement scholars have been trying to tackle this paradox since its very beginning. Humanities scholars too have been debating the ‘nature’ of queer, and its utility for politics of gender and sexuality, being the first to introduce the term queer into political and academic spheres. Two main suggestions have been suggested as a solution to overcome this paradox. The first would be to consider queer as a more ‘inclusive’ identity, still anchored in a larger LGBT frame. The second option would consider queer a distinct identity, a political and personal identity in which sexuality does not play the primordial role.

In the first case, admitting that queer is a more inclusive identity would be an easy solution. This definition still locates queer within a traditional frame of identity politics, with the difference of having looser boundaries. As Teresa de Lauretis, the first scholar to introduce queer theory, claims:

‘The current term queer, too, while still carrying something of its historical connotations of sexual abnormality, quickly covers them up by presenting itself as gender-inclusive, democratic, queer texts, habits, and the issue of a future multicultural, and multispecies, and *thus effectively shifts the ground away from the nitty-gritty of sexuality* — the polymorphous-perverse that Mario Mieli theorized in the visionary, radical 1970s. (2011: 248-249, italics mine)

But is inclusiveness the correct term with which to approach ‘queer’? Michael Warner reminds us that this rhetoric is false, since ‘there are a lot of people - visibly, actively, impressively, lesbian and gay - who do not find a home in queerness’. (2005: 316). The same is stated by Kosofsky-Sedwick:

‘Everyone knows that there are some lesbians and gay men who could never count as queer, and other people who vibrate to the chord of queer without having much



same-sex eroticism, or without routing their same-sex eroticism through the identity labels lesbian or gay' (1993: 13)

Therefore, queer is not a more inclusive evolution of the gay and lesbian movement. It functions rather as a parallel sphere. Its identity is shaped as a response to this distinction from the frame of gay and lesbian identity politics, by setting as aspiration to challenge dominant identitarian discourses and propose new modes of performing politics:

'Queer politics...has not just replaced older modes of lesbian and gay politics; it has come to exist alongside those older modes, opening up new possibilities and problems whose relation to more familiar problems is not always clear' (Warner, 2005: 213)

Thus, among the solutions proposed to the paradox of queer as an inclusive identity or as an identity apart, I advance the reading of queer as a distinct semi-autonomous sphere of collective identification, which is constituted as a response to the identitarian frames of gay and lesbian politics.

### 5.2.2 Performance and Theatricality

One of the basic constituents of queer festivals is the playful, performative mode of actions. As Benjamin Shepard claims, 'ludic expressions are found throughout the history of queer social protest' (2010: 9). By performative practices, I mean 'the extravagant performance of a range of queer identities and styles, but...also...theatrical enactments — either dramatic or parodic — of other social identities.' (Ziv, 2010: 545). Performative politics is therefore not limited to performances, as orchestrated stage-oriented and directed shows. According to Shepard, 'many of the most relevant forms of queer political performance stretch well beyond the traditional contours of the theatre' (2010: 12).

It has to be noted here that the ‘performative’ character of queer festivals is not a new mode of action, and it is certainly not limited to queer politics. Theatre and performances have always been part of the repertoire of the broader gay and lesbian movement (Shepard, 2010; Taylor et al. 2004). In Europe, during the 70s, gay liberation groups used gender parodying and street performances in order to enact the revolutionary character of their political claims. The group Gazolines in France, for instance, was remarkable in the ways that its members performed gender transgression through clothing and body style. Moreover, they exploited gender parody by serving tea to the general assemblies of FHAR, the Homosexual Front of Revolutionary Action, to exaggerate the stereotype of female obedience. (Sibalis, 2010). After the 90s, and with the establishment of Gay Prides across the West, performances constituted a major constituent of this repertoire of action (Browne, 2007). Beyond gay politics, other social movements have also used performances and parody as part of their repertoire of action. The alter-globalization demonstrations of the last decades exploited performativity (in the theatrical sense of the term) and made it one among others forms of action. As Hardt and Negri admit:

‘It is easy to recognize the *performative, carnivalesque nature* of the various protest movements that have arisen around questions of globalization...The demonstrations are *highly theatrical*, with giant puppets, costumes, dances, humorous songs, chants, and so forth. The protests...are also street festivals in which the anger of the protesters coexists with their joy in the carnival’ (2004: 211) [italics mine].

To come back to queer festivals, performances constitute an essential part of their ritualization, and of their identity-work. Different kinds of performances take place in the festivals: drag queen and drag king shows, theatre, dance, parodies, mimes, body installations, performative-playful contention, but also smaller, spontaneous performances. All these performances set as their aim to ‘destabilize gender and sexual categories by making visible the social basis of femininity and masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, and presenting hybrid and minority genders and

sexualities' (Rupp et al., 2010: 277), while functioning as a 'tactical repertoire' of the broader gay and lesbian movement (Taylor et al., 2004).<sup>53</sup>

As Jose Munoz claimed, performances 'rehearse identities that have been rendered toxic within the dominant public sphere but are...restructured (yet not cleansed) so they present newly imagined notions of the self and the social' (1997: 83). The ways to achieve this are multiple but Munoz stresses the most interesting, to him, which is 'disidentification'. Disidentification is 'a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology' (Munoz, 1997: 83). Taylor et al. remind us that 'disidentification' works predominantly among the drag queens of their field. How is this expressed?

'[T]he performers appropriate dominant gender and sexual categories and practices, neither rejecting them nor embracing them but using the fact that femininity and heterosexuality are being performed by gay men to construct a hybrid and more fluid model of gender and sexuality' (Taylor et al., 2004: 117)

How does 'disidentification' work in the performances of the queer festivals? In fact, queer festivals seek 'to abolish (or at least destabilize and problematize) 'the homosexual' as identity, as well as woman, man, and other gender identities (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 335). By embedding these kinds of performances within their repertoire of action, queer festivals participate in this process of identity destabilization, which allows queer actors to process to strategies of disidentification from dominant identitarian categories. This makes it one of the basic constituents of queer identity-work. In the meanwhile, by attempting to challenge dominant sexual and gender codes, queer festivals build an oppositional discourse, which can be read through these performances, if we see performances as discursive texts equal to any other texts, mediated through rational-

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<sup>53</sup> The authors define 'tactical repertoires' as 'interactive episodes that link social movement actors to each other as well as to opponents and authorities for the intended purpose of challenging or resisting change in groups, organizations or societies' (Taylor et al, 2004: 112)

critical debate.<sup>54</sup> Thus, performative politics should be considered as a style, which mediates political messages and therefore shapes the festivals' identity. The production, circulation and internal (inside the festival) and external (in the street) reception of these performative texts shape queer counterpublics. The external character of performative texts is particularly important for counterpublics because it recognizes how privacy is publicly constructed, and challenges 'our understanding of how private life can be made publicly relevant' (Warner, 2005: 62). By introducing into the public sphere their politics, queer counterpublics bring: 'new privacies, new individuals, new bodies, new intimacies, and new citizenships' (Warner, 2005: 62)

### 5.2.3 Autonomy and the commons

Why do all queer festivals identify as 'autonomous'? What does autonomy signify and how does it relate to the festivals' identity-work? As Gavin Brown has shown, the autonomous character of queer activism can be traced back to the transnational alterglobalization protests and the appearance of pink blocs inside the corteges (Brown, 2007). Besides, many autonomous feminist groups<sup>55</sup> which emerged from the alterglobalization movement tried to intersect various struggles, queerness included<sup>56</sup>. Queeruption organized 'autonomous DIY' queer festivals until 2008.

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<sup>54</sup> I use an extended definition of discursive text: 'discourse ... is not always and exclusively verbal: Issues and attitudes are expressed and contested in dance, music, gesture, food, ritual, artifact, symbolic action, as well as words ... . [I]nvestigated historically within their political contexts, [cultural performances] ... are profoundly deliberative occasions' (Conquergood, 1991: 189; cited in Pezzullo, 2003: 350). This definition aligns with the theoretical trend of Laclau and Mouffe who define discourse as not only 'purely linguistic phenomena; but... [as] the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive formation is structured' (2001: 109).

<sup>55</sup> I use feminist movement as an analytical category, which is more restricted in relation to the women's movement: partially included in it, without however limiting itself inside it (Bereni and Revillard, 2012: 18). I distinguish therefore the feminist movement from the women's movement as analytical categories, since the latter uses the category of 'woman' in order to mobilize. This is not the case for the former.

<sup>56</sup> For instance, organizations such as the NextGeneration transnational network, as well as the feminist collective Karakola from Madrid both focus on aspects of gender, queerness, and precariousness (Poldervaart, 2006). Both collectives participated in the European social forums of London and Paris (ibid.). Other grassroots feminist groups have focused specifically on the relations between gender and work, creating new collective identities, which move beyond the traditional analyses of gender issues. FeministAttac is, for instance, one group constituted within the German network of Attac, pressing for

Autonomy is viewed as a ‘radical imaginary, the urge to imagine other society’ (Chatterton, 2005: 547). This sort of ‘anti-power’ is claimed by the queer imaginary. The autonomous modes of queer living are usually based on two levels, a collective and an individual (Brown, 2007: 2688; Souza, 2000: 188). Hence, collectively, autonomy operates through self-rule and the consensus-based decision-making organization of any society. Individually, autonomy is presented as a free-choice in decision making for every person. When it comes however to the definition that festivals attribute to themselves, autonomy should be seen as in its collective value, relating historically to three distinct moments of European social movement activity. Thus, autonomy signifies: (a) independence from political parties and trade unions, (b) ‘politics of the first person’, as opposed to traditional notions of revolutionaries leading the nation or the working class, and operating according to self-managed consensus and self-discipline [This characteristic refers mainly to Italian Autonomia and feminism], (c) direct-democratic forms of decision-making and militant popular resistance [This characteristic refers mainly to German Autonomien]. (Katsiaficas, 1997: 6-8)

This is the theoretical frame of autonomy which queer festivals refer to, when they use it as a tool to build their distinct collective identity. Each festival presents variations, according to the degree of involvement in autonomous politics, and the form autonomous politics takes in the local activist context. A characteristic example is the Roman case, which is clearly linked to the Italian Autonomia, while the Berlin festival links more to the German understanding of Autonomien. Going beyond these local specificities, however, the common identification patterns with autonomy, and their enrichment by recent theories on the commons, will be relevant for the identity-building of queer festivals.

### 5.3 Addressing identity issues in practice

I will now analyse the issues of identity-work as negotiated in practice, through the various discursive texts festivals produce and distribute. I will begin with the callouts, the texts that festivals use to publicize themselves on social media. Callouts function as the primary evidence of the types of actors queer festivals want to address. By addressing an a priori unknown audience, the aim of festivals is definitely to create a public (Warner, 2002: 55). As it will become clear as early as in the callouts, the ‘queer public’ aspires to be different from the ‘gay public’ (Calhoun, 2004: 166), promoting an inclusive ethos, with a more confrontational discourse, and underground aesthetics. Callouts will testify to the positioning of queer festivals in the intersections between the ‘multiple-tolerant identities model’ and the ‘anti-identitarian’ model that I discussed in Chapter 1 (see Table 1.2). I will move on to demonstrate how other discursive texts function as catalysers for the identity-work of queer festivals. Based on my ethnographic observation of the Rome queer festival, I will use the examples of one demonstration and one performance, which illustrate the performative imaginaries of queer identity building. I will close this chapter with the discussions on autonomy and the politics of the ‘commons’, which took place in the workshop at the Queeristan festival in Amsterdam in May 2012, and an examination of their role in the identity-work of queer festivals.

#### 5.3.1 Inclusive but Anti-Identitarian: Setting the boundaries of identity-work

##### *a. Callouts and their role in identity-work*

Callouts have a primordial importance for queer festivals. Through their circulation on social media, callouts attract participants, by making the events known to people across Europe. Callouts are short texts used for the announcement of the festivals, and are diffused on social media, the web and posters. In the callout, queer festivals position

themselves, by presenting their actions and political orientations, making clear who is welcome to come, and asking for people’s proposals for the organization of workshops and performances. In addressing an a priori unknown audience, callouts have the power to build a public (Warner, 2002: 55). In reality, callouts are ‘spaces of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself’ (Warner, 2002: 50). This autotelic communication has in mind some imaginary, yet not unreal, addressees. Thus, the callouts function as a boundary, fixing the discourse’s organization, since the addressees are not all known in advance.

But beyond their communicative function, callouts hold another significance for queer festivals: they attempt to set the boundaries for the identity-work which will take place during the event. Although the targeted public is unknown, it needs to be constituted according to an idea of common identifications. These identifications are set in order to distinguish queer festivals from other political events, and therefore build their distinct collective identity.

Through the analysis of the callouts of the festivals in my fieldwork, I will demonstrate the ongoing legacy of the anti-identitarian narrative of queerness, enriched by openness towards other discriminated groups, with regards to disability or economic disenfranchisement. Despite their importance for festivals’ identity work, however, callouts lack a systematic organization of the discourse. The basic frames I discerned in the callouts of the festivals are the following:

**Table 5.1 Basic Frames of festivals’ call-outs**

a. Queer goes beyond sexual and gender identifications, moves beyond the traditional claims of the LGBT movement and deviates from the norm;
b. Queer addresses people with no resources, and helps them join the events;
c. It is particularly attentive to issues of linguistic and age inclusivity.

These three frames share some common points. They attempt to move the boundaries of inclusion a bit further. They are not completely oppositional to the existence of the identities per se. But they are rather critical of the way these are used to erect barriers in political participation and claim making. One main pattern in all the callouts is the idea that they want to create a space in which rigid, fixed identities are not encouraged. Rather, fluid, playful practices of gender and sexuality are welcome, while a narrative of inclusion of lower social classes or people with precarious working conditions is emphasized.

To begin with, I will examine the main frames of the festivals' callouts in relation to already existing anti-identitarian theoretical frameworks. I will proceed to a parallel exploration of activists' accounts of their perceptions on queerness, and see how these two voices (callouts and activists' narratives) complement and/or contradict each other. Here, the educational backgrounds of the activists and their specific academic training in gender and queer studies will be seen to be particularly useful.

**Table 5.2. Demarcation of identity boundaries through the callouts: Extracts of festivals' callouts**

Callout extracts	City, Year
<i>'We wish to create a space, which is not based on money, as we find this is the case in society today. The festival is open to all, whether or not they have money'.</i>	<u>Copenhagen, 2012</u> <sup>57</sup>
<i>'For us queer is not merely a synonym for "gay/lesbian", but rather an open call for action, which includes a lot more than the sexual orientation or gender identity of the individual. Queer is a deviation from the norm, challenging and questioning boundaries that are upheld within</i>	<u>Berlin, 2013</u> <sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.queerfestival.org/>

<sup>58</sup> <http://quear.blogspot.eu/en/about/>



<i>mainstream society’.</i>	
<i>It is important for us that everyone can take part in the festival, independent of economy or age...We are happy to help those who need it with some accommodation for your travel expenses, with all the money left after the festival.. We are happy to change locations for the workshops, build ramps and make Blitz as accessible as we can</i>	<u>Oslo, 2013</u> <sup>59</sup>
<i>The <u>call out</u> is available in several other languages including: <u>Nederlands, Deutsch, Español, Português, Italiano &amp; Türkçe</u>...Queeristan is an autonomous, DIY festival, based on voluntary work... However, if financial support is needed... we will take it into consideration.</i>	<u>Amsterdam, 2013</u> <sup>60</sup>
<i>On the battleground of civil and social rights, the LGBTI movement is often relegating itself in the foxhole of same-sex marriage and LGBT parenting; that for equality is a dutiful battle but we should try to imagine new ways of raising and struggling, new practices, new intuitions.... We invite all the interested (inter)national groups to join us in Rome... to meet, discuss our perspectives and practices and to share (new) visions, imageries, goals and desires.</i>	<u>Rome, 2013</u> <sup>61</sup>

## *b. Callouts’ frames: Setting the boundaries of identity-work*

**A. Beyond sexual and gender identities-Deviation from the norms:** According to the Berlin festival’s callout, ‘queer is not merely a synonym of gay and lesbian’. This is the basic narrative upon which queer builds itself as a distinct identity, and it is present as

<sup>59</sup> [http://osloqueerfestival.blogspot.it/p/practical-info\\_24.html](http://osloqueerfestival.blogspot.it/p/practical-info_24.html)

<sup>60</sup> <http://queeristan.org/2013/02/24/queeristan-2013-call-out/#dutch>

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.damieliaqueer.com/wp/appello-en/>

such in every callout. Queer moves beyond the strict identification of a person with a rigid sexual identity (gay for men, lesbian for women).

To begin with, this narrative of queer going beyond 'gay and lesbian' conforms to the principal idea of queer theory. In reality, queer theory advances the explanation that gender and sexuality are not essentialist categories, but rather the products of social and political control. Similarly, 'going beyond gay and lesbian' conforms to the historical development of the queer movement. In reality, the queer movement has developed as a reaction against institutionalized forms of identity politics, represented through the 'gay and lesbian' identities. This so-called identity politics model of the gay and lesbian movement places sexuality as the primordial characteristic of individuals and encloses them in an imagined political community (Warner, 2005: 221<sup>62</sup>; Corber and Vallocchi, 2003: 2<sup>63</sup>; Gamson, 1995: 390<sup>64</sup>).

Queer politics was born as an attempt to disconnect from the identity-politics model of the 'gay and lesbian movement'. This becomes clearer if we look back at how queer politics antagonized both the state and the gay and lesbian movement in the late 80s and throughout the 90s in the USA. Groups such as ACT-UP New York, Queer Nation and SexPanic attempted to challenge the dominant identitarian discourses of the gay and lesbian movement of that time. It is the continuation of this confrontational, narrative, which attempts to mark a divide from the gay and lesbian movement, and that continues to inspire queer festivals:

'On the battleground of civil and social rights, the LGBTI movement is often relegating itself in the foxhole of same-sex marriage and LGBT parenting; that for equality is a dutiful battle but we should try to imagine new ways of raise and

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<sup>62</sup> 'Feminist and racial movements, along with the lesbian and gay movement, are frequently animated by displaced frustrations with atomizing conditions of market-mediated life, frustrations that find expression in the otherwise *misleading and damaging ideal of 'community'* [italics mine]

<sup>63</sup> 'According to this model, gays and lesbians constitute an oppressed minority similar to other oppressed minorities such as Jews and African Americans, and they have their own distinct history and culture that can be traced to the ancient Greeks'

<sup>64</sup> 'Queerness in its most distinctive forms shakes the ground on which gay and lesbian politics has been built, taking apart the ideas of a "sexual minority" and a "gay community," indeed of "gay" and "lesbian" and even "man" and "woman".'

struggling, new practices, new intuitions. We want to fertilize again the movement, out of the contingency of “managing” the ordinary issues. We want to have an imprudent gaze to look at new scenarios.’ (Rome, 2013)

Queer politics is imagined as a more radical confrontation, holding an ‘imprudent gaze’ and suggesting ‘new scenarios’. There is a utopian stance in these words, fitting into the whole prefigurative scene in which queer festivals are set. The boundaries queer festivals attempt to build as a distinction from the gay and lesbian identity politics movement can be seen as three streams: (1) Deviation, (2) Everyday implications, and (3) Explicit opposition to the LGBT movement.

(1) Deviation and everyday implications: Queer festivals are not imagined as one more identity on the ‘shopping-list’ of identities (Flesher-Fominaya, forthcoming: 73). They are rather seen as a ‘deviation’ to normality. The QuEAR festival’s callout is illustrative:

‘Queer is a deviation from the norm, challenging and questioning boundaries that are upheld within mainstream society. Queer is also a utopia, not in the bourgeois sense of otherworldliness, but as a space that needs to be constantly (re)created and projected into new spaces, which is the aim of this event’ (Berlin, 2013)

This concept of ‘deviation’ from the norm is coherent with the etymology of the word ‘queer’ itself. ‘Queer’ was used as the reverse of the original stigma, into a positive political identity (Kosofsky-Sedwick, 1993: 4). Vella, who at the time of the interview was a PhD candidate in gender studies, accurately reproduces this narrative. Deviation is linked to her own interpretations of what constitutes queer:

‘I think ultimately queer to me means two things: one is...*opposition towards the regulation of lives, by gender and sexuality*. Through my theoretical work, I have often had to think about you know what is it that I’m thinking through, what’s the problem? ... And then, there’s this amazing text by Gayle Rubin ‘Notes on thinking

sex'<sup>65</sup>, where she has this model of the circle mode, where she writes about what forms of sexuality are allowed and which ones are not. And it's this multi-dimensional model, which she does not say that one dimension is more important so she doesn't put homosexuality in there. But she also has money-no money, BDSM or vanilla, intergenerational versus intra-generational, like old and young, and so on. And I thought, I like that.' (Berlin, August 2011)

Vella's understanding of 'queer' is mediated through her own academic training in gender studies. During our interview, she turns very often to theoretical analyses on gender and sexuality, as they are debated in academia.

The imagination of queer as an identity moving beyond 'normality' is reproduced by other activists too. Although in less theoretical wording, queers with non-academic training imagine queerness as an identity against the 'mainstream', as it operates within society and politics. In activists' narratives, 'mainstream' holds a negative connotation. By opposing the 'mainstream', queer connects with an image of 'alternative lifestyle'. To the similar question of 'How do you perceive queer', Vladimir, from the Copenhagen festival, advances the same explanations, although less theoretically elaborated than Vella's, due mostly to his lack of academic training:

'At the beginning, I was [perceiving] something with alternative, alternative, *non-mainstream, non-mainstream gay or lesbian*, and then yes [it was] implicit that we had some basic feminism, being left and, and yes, more or less, and then I'm realizing more or less that in fact it is a culture and yeah like every culture you have to learn it.' (Copenhagen, July 2011- italics mine)

Vladimir's response is significant in that it has not been contaminated by academic discourses: he is a call-centre worker in Berlin, with no academic training in gender

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<sup>65</sup> She refers to one of the fundamentals of gender studies: Rubin Gayle (1975) *The traffic in women: Notes on the political economy of sex*. In: *Toward an anthropology of women* (ed. Reiter), New York, Monthly Review Press

studies whatsoever. The complex anti-identitarian theories cannot be found in his narrative. What we can retrieve however from his story are the practical implications of what 'queerness' signifies. According to his interpretations, queer functions as a *culture*, an alternative space of socialization. As a culture, queer needs therefore to be learnt.<sup>66</sup>

In a similar vein, Gem's descriptions connect 'queer' with everyday life. In order to define her conception of 'queer' she narrates a personal story:

'There was a Slutwalk on Saturday...In the morning of the Slutwalk, when we were dressing up, I had a shirt on, that was half,that you can see through it. Automatically my girlfriend told me 'wear a bra on'. And it was amazing, because both of us are very conscious people. She is part of the orga[nization] team of this thing, very very, I don't want to say liberal but for me, *questioning the hierarchy we're brought into the society*. Sort of an automatic response of: 'are you putting a bra', it could be also 'maybe people will see your tits'' (Berlin, August 2011).

Queer is 'a constant questioning of bases, roots, behaviours, ways of thinking, the culture we live in.'. This is the way Gem's definitions of queerness is linked to the cultural aspects advanced by Vladimir. Her understanding of queer connects to his practical, everyday lifestyle narrative. In all cases, queer is imagined as a distinct identity, taking the form of either an exodus-like anti-identitarian fantasy or an immediate connection with alternative spaces of socialization and everyday life implications.

(2) Explicit reference to the LGBT movement: Queer functions as opposed to what the LGBT movement 'traditionally' represents. This imagined opposition is activated and more articulately expressed, once there is a clash between two political organizations working on the same field of sexual politics. The story of Casimiro is illustrative. In the following extract, he attempts to describe QueerLab as opposed to the LGBT section of the communist-oriented student movement [Link](#):

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<sup>66</sup> Vladimir's argument will be explicitly addressed in Chapter 7, when I discuss the cultural aspects of queer identity.

‘[The Link movement] have a very *traditional* way of facing the questions. So, it’s *more LGBT oriented*: recognition of diversity, recognition of rights. So it’s a way in which it is *different* from queer politics as we know: they do not really question the binaries, and this kind of stuff. It’s acceptance of diversity: promotion, all this kind of stuff’. (Casimiro, Rome 2013)

According to Casimiro, a movement working in the old school, traditional way of recognition of rights and diversity is ‘*more LGBT oriented*’. On the contrary, queer is imagined as different to the idea of simple recognition of rights: queer is supposed to challenge the binaries, by moving beyond ‘recognition’, which is the major political claim of the LGBT movement. By focusing only on issues of ‘rights’, the LGBT movement’s discourse does not attempt to destabilize social and political norms, thus maintaining the difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality, man and woman, the traditional gender and sexual binaries.

This queer narrative of explicit difference from the LGBT movement is promoted within the spaces through the texts that circulate inside the festivals. Illustrative of this is one of the posters at the Copenhagen queer festival: ‘Here is a Queer party. Not a Gay party’. This slogan functions clearly in the direction of creating a distinct identity, which is built precisely by reference to a presupposed ‘gay’ identity. By using the word ‘gay’ as opposite to ‘queer’, festivals attempt performatively to set the boundaries between the two identities<sup>67</sup>.

The commitment of queer politics to identifying as *different* from gay and lesbian politics, or as it is usually known, the LGBT movement, is one of the basic constituents of the construction of queer festivals’ identity. This is stated very clearly in the manifesto of the Rome festival: ‘the LGBTI movement is often relegating itself in the foxhole of

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<sup>67</sup> I also read this demarcation as a reaction against the masculine domination of gay males within the LGBT movement, contrary to queer politics, which is imagined as promoter of a more feminist agenda.

same-sex marriage and LGBT parenting’. Queer festivals tend to read the LGBT as a movement with a rather limited scope. By setting itself to the defense of a specific, normative sexual identity (gay, lesbian), the LGBT movement is accused of missing other parts of oppression, and thus setting itself apart from other struggles, which do not relate directly to sexuality, but include economy, race or gender.

**B. Challenge to neoliberalism- Support for economically deprived:** Inclusivity is the second major frame to be discerned in the callouts. The strategy of broader inclusivity conforms to the logics of moving beyond gender and sexuality. A major preoccupation for festivals is the economic background of potential participants. This is manifested in every callout. Festivals recommend reasonable accommodation to participants from other cities and countries, while some of them have the means to provide performers, workshop organizers, and even some participants, with financial support. The Oslo festival’s callout is illustrative: ‘We are happy to help those who need it with some accommodation for your travel expenses, with all the money left after the festival’. Queer festivals base themselves on prefigurative spaces, which are not ruled by capitalist logics of production and consumption. As Copenhagen’s callout states: ‘We wish to create a space, which is not based on money, as we find this is the case in society today. The festival is open to all, whether or not they have money’.

The narrative of *inclusivity to the economically deprived* seems significant for the festivals’ identity-work. I believe, however, that the role of this narrative is, in reality, to legitimize the participation of actors from middle classes, by providing the alibi of supporting all people wanting to attend., ‘Independent of economy’ is a sort of self-consciousness of the middle-class dominance in the festivals. Finally, the callouts do not promote any coherent anti-capitalist discourse, which would fit better with the whole idea of the temporary prefigurative community they envisage. Anti-capitalist critique is seen as underrepresented within queer festivals by some activists. As Vella from the QuEar festival criticized:

‘Critical capitalism, although that’s always underdeveloped. So, to me politically, I understand myself in this kind of critical position as I said, hierarchies, forms of dominance and capitalism and as creating spaces where you can find escape.’  
(Berlin, August 2011)

c. **Linguistic, age and disability inclusivity**: The third frame to be drawn from festivals’ callouts expands the narrative of *inclusivity*, as we saw in the previous section. This new frame addresses inclusivity regarding language skills, age matters, and disability. One of the basic aims of queer festivals is to address an international public. This public certainly tends to speak English. Queer festivals seem keen however to include non-English speakers as well. Since 2013, for instance, the queer festivals of Amsterdam and Berlin have displayed their callouts in multiple languages, migrants’ languages included, such as Turkish and Arabic. The translation of the callout does not target people coming from Arab countries or Turkey per se. It rather aims at a migrant, non-educated and thus non-English speaking audience, living in the cities in which the festivals take place. Moreover, there is the tendency for callouts to be written in simple vocabulary. This frame is connected to that of economic support, since the possession (or not) of literacy skills cannot be separated from the social classes divides which queer festivals strive to address.

Age becomes another crucial factor for the inclusive identity-work of queer festivals. As the results from the survey illustrated, the dominant age cohort of participants is the group 20-29, followed by the group 30-39. This lack of representation of older ages seems to preoccupy the festivals’ organizers, who attempt in their callouts to welcome all age groups. Finally, disability too forms part of the inclusive narrative of the callouts. Oslo’s callout is particularly exemplary to the degree that it links several discriminatory conditions:

‘It is important for us that everyone can take part in the festival, independent of economy or age...We are happy to change locations for the workshops, build ramps and make Blitz [the squat in which the festival took place] as accessible as we can’.



Inclusion towards disabled people is an important aspect for the understanding of queer identity-work. As Vella, member of the organization committee of the QuEar festival in Berlin, said:

‘We did a lot of things, to make this festival inclusive for people with wheelchairs, and there was some ethos to make it inclusive for those who cannot hear very well, and also there was support for a blind person.’ (August 2011)

I used callouts as discursive texts exemplary of how queer festivals present themselves to the unknown public they attempt to address. By juxtaposing the understandings of activists on these frames, I concluded that festivals deploy a narrative of broad inclusion, stretching the limits of gender, sexuality, class, age, and disability and setting the first boundaries of the festivals’ collective identity. Callouts give us quite a clear picture of how festivals see and imagine themselves, and to what extent they conform to the queer idea of the anti-identitarian narrative. Rather than completely spurning the concept of identity, they rather attempt to broaden it, by encompassing different aspects of potential discrimination, such as language, age and disability. Therefore, going beyond the anti-identitarian ethos, as derived from the historical legacy of queer politics, callouts evidence the ‘multiple, tolerant identities’ logics too (della Porta, 2005). It would be erroneous however to limit the understanding of the festivals’ identity to the discourses which they use in order to portray themselves. I move now to the second characteristic upon which festivals are built: performative logics.

### 5.3.2 Performative logics

Queer festivals borrow performative politics as a repertoire of action and adapt it to the new counterpublic arenas they attempt to construct. I use the term performative politics, rather than the term ‘performance’, to include every kind of acting, orchestrated, directed performances or more spontaneous forms of actions, which take place in front of ad hoc

audiences, as well as acts of parodying, miming, and any other similar activity, stressing the playful character of the actions. For this purpose, I use two significant examples from the Rome queer festival. The first is the Slutwalk, a demonstration organized on the third day of the festival. Slutwalk presents a deliberately performative character. The second is the description of Bibliotheque Erotique's show, an orchestrated performance by a queer group, which took place on the last night of the festival, and which led to a second spontaneous, sexual show.

Each performance presents different characteristics. The Slutwalk has an external performative role, to the degree that the action addresses an unknown public, a mainstream audience, a priori not familiar with the politics of the queer festival. This external dimension is crucial for the articulation of the collective identity 'between members of the different groups who gather to participate in the event on the one hand, and the larger community, on the other' (Taylor et al., 2004: 112). The second performance has an internal character, to the extent that it occurred inside the festival, and had as main addressees the public of the festival, the participants and the organizers. Their joint inclusion in the category of 'performative politics' allows an exploration of the importance of performative politics for the identity building of queer festivals, both at the external and at the internal level. By viewing performative politics as a repertoire of action of queer festivals, we could expand the understanding of how a collective identity can be built upon different styles that move beyond the rational-critical mode of communication as promoted by Habermas. In brief, both performances participate actively in the identity building process of the festivals, and contribute to the construction of counterpublics, by advancing an extra-rational proposal of political identities. By revealing their celebratory and emotional character, but also their internal controversies and complex meanings, I will show (a) the role of these external and internal performances for the identity building of the festivals, and (b) their degree of importance in the construction of the festivals as arenas in which counterpublics emerge.

a. Putting the body on the front: The SlutWalk of Rome

*Rome. Day 3.*

*[Inside Teatro Valle]*

*We are all informed by the organizers that the demonstration is unauthorized. One specific person from the organization will negotiate with the police if the need arises.*

*[...]*

*[At the beginning of the demonstration]*

*We are at least 200 people: participants of the queer festival, the organizers, members of affiliated collectives, such as the feminist collective Ribellule, members from the Teatro Valle. I ask Cassimiro about the direction of the demo. He says that the objective of the trajectory is to traverse the historical centre of the city until we are in front of the Parliament, and then return to Teatro Valle, making one stop at the hyper-touristic square Campo de Fiori.*

*[...]*

*The crowd starts walking. Some people dance. There is loud music, since people are carrying mobile sound systems. I hear the song 'Voulez-vous coucher avec moi?' and Madonna's 'Material Girl'. The dressing styles vary. I notice sexually provocative dressing from men and women. Boys in particular look very sexually explicit, with shorts. One is licking a banana provocatively. Girls walk wearing only their bras. Others have drawn moustaches on their faces.<sup>68</sup>*

*[...]*

*There is a microphone, which is passed between three to four people from the festival. The first person, Foti, a rasta-haired boy dressed in black shorts and an open gilet, is shouting in Italian: 'The Slutwalk is ready to start!!'*

*[...]*

*After leaving the narrow road where Teatro Valle I situated, we become exposed to larger streets with more people looking at us. There are many tourists too. We shout slogans, both in Italian and English: 'Siamo puttane' ('We are whores/prostitutes), and 'Tell men not to rape'. After a while, a girl grabs the microphone from Foti and starts shouting: 'La prima slutwalk in Italia, La Marcia delle puttane sta attraversando le strade del centro da roma (The first Slutwalk in Italy, The Slut Walk [in Italian], is walking the streets of the centre of Rome)'.*

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<sup>68</sup> For more details on the dressing styles, see the chapter on cultural practices

[...]

*[At 17:30] We arrive in front of the Italian parliament. The building is blocked with barricades, and policemen are guarding the space. We stay for approximately ten minutes. Some of us whistle in defiance of the police, others continue dancing and singing. Music still goes on. We leave the Parliament and head back to the Teatro Valle. We shout slogans. Some of us hand out leaflets to the passersby. A couple of women are observing us from the outside: they are reading the leaflets and raise their hands, shouting 'bravo', and clapping their hands. Many people ignore us, however, on our way back. We suddenly stop in front of a church, which is on our way. 2-3 boys are running quickly in order to enter the church. Suddenly, the door of the church closes in our face. We start gathering on the steps of this church. The organizers invite us for a photo. We take poses. Some of us pull their trousers down, baring their bottoms to the church.<sup>69</sup>*

[...]

*We head towards Teatro Valle. A final stop is made in front of another church at Campo de Fiori Square. We are invited to take part in a kiss-in. I didn't know this action had been planned. People become enthusiastic. People start kissing on the mouth, two by two, three by three, four by four. I kiss with one friend from Amsterdam. And five seconds later, a man from the Teatro Valle joins us. I didn't even know his name. I can see some straight kisses too.<sup>70</sup>*

On the third day of the Rome queer festival, a SlutWalk was organized. The idea was introduced by the radical feminist collective Ribellule, which has been acting in the feminist scene of Rome since 2005<sup>71</sup>. According to Ribellule activists whom I interviewed a couple of hours after the end of the Slutwalk:

'It was a moment to try to express ourselves in the streets. Not only something that you do by yourself but something we wanted to do all together. The Slutwalk has a history. So, it's not something that we invented. Because of course it started in Canada, because during an auto-defense training, a policeman said that it was

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<sup>69</sup> The main photo coverage of the Slutwalk from the newspaper La Repubblica is from that moment. See: <http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/04/06/foto/manifestazione-56090029/1/>

<sup>70</sup> Field Notes, Rome, April 2013

<sup>71</sup> <http://leribellule.noblogs.org/>

preferable for women that wanted not to be raped to not dress as a slut. So, this is why a Slutwalk. Because we are all sluts.’ (Anna, Rome, April 2013)

Ribellule connected the Rome Slutwalk with the broader global movement of Slutwalks that started in Toronto, Canada in 2011, thus attempting to build transnational bridges and internationalize their struggles through this imaginary continuation of Slutwalks across the globe. Ribellule’s account thus conforms to the official historical narrative of Toronto being the starting point of Slutwalks:

‘The Toronto SlutWalk, organized in response to a police officer’s offensive remarks about women who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing sexual assault, triggered off similar protests across the world. Through these protests, feminists and non-feminists highlighted concerns related to power relations, sexual harassment and violence, and at the same time asserted their sexuality through the clothes they wore and the messages they displayed’ (Borah and Nandi, 2012: 415)

Slutwalk was rapidly diffused to many other geographical contexts (Edgerton and Sotirova, 2011: 35), not always uncontroversial within the local feminist movements.<sup>72</sup>

The Roman Slutwalk to a large extent followed the patterns of other Slutwalks, as testified in the above academic contributions, especially regarding their discursive and performative level. Thus, the main rationale behind the demonstration was the attempt to inverse the stigma of the insulting denomination (‘slut, and its re-appropriation into a visible political identity. ‘Slut’ follows the same discursive strategy as ‘queer’. Shame is capable of generating a powerful emotion in its addressees, and the insult can then be appropriated for the construction of an active identity. ‘I am the product of insult. A son of shame’ writes Didier Eribon, describing his own path towards the building of his homosexual identity (Eribon, 2009: 204- translation mine). And similarly, Kosofsky-Sedwick writes about shame:

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<sup>72</sup> See the Indian case, Borah and Nandi (2012)

‘It generates and legitimates the place of identity – the question of identity- at the origin of the impulse to the performative but does so without giving that identity-space the standing of an essence’ (1993: 14)

The sort of identity that shame is able to create is anti-essentialist, always ‘to-be-constituted’, yet very powerful, precisely because it is based upon such a strong emotion: shame. Therefore, ‘queer’ and ‘slut’ share some tenacious identifications, since their departure point is the shameful, which becomes the performative, thus creating an identity. Similarly to the slogans shouted, the posters carried within the demonstration also capture this idea of shame. Through their transcription into visual discourse, posters were transforming the insult of ‘slut’ into a political identity with specific targets: ‘Clothes are not my consent’, ‘La minigonna non stupra’ (‘The miniskirt does not rape’), ‘Don’t tell me what to wear. Tell men not to rape’.

The Roman Slutwalk had some specificities, however, that were connected to its local context. The demonstration was unauthorized; it crossed the most touristic place of the capital and created an anti-Catholic ethos, reflected in two actions which took place during the Walk: first, the kiss-in in front of a church at Campo di Fiori, (additionally one of the most touristic squares of the city), and second, the photo we took in front of a second church, in which activists bared their buttocks. By encompassing actions with multiple meanings, the Slutwalk went beyond the celebration of the ‘slut’ identity. In reality, it attempted to connect its queer origins with an anti-Catholic ethos, manifested in the provocative actions in front of the churches.

The Slutwalk was the festival’s only contentious action, this being defined as a collective action exposing its actors to an a priori hostile public space. Following this line of thought, it could be said that the Slutwalk, beyond its internal collective-identity building, holds a significant *external* dimension. The Slutwalk makes up a part of the repertoire of queer festivals, thus articulating a collective identity between the participants and the larger community (Taylor et al., 2004: 112). The demonstration allowed the creation of a

situation antagonistic to public authorities, mainly the police, since the demonstration was unauthorized. It is precisely the unauthorized, and thus antagonistic character of the demonstration that makes the Slutwalk a direct action, distinct from traditional marches and rallies (Juris, 2008: 125). At the same time, the antagonistic situation is to be found at the cultural level. The demonstration involved two kiss-ins in front of Catholic churches, challenging the religious presence of the Vatican in the city. The transgressive dressing styles, together with the provocative slogans complete the picture of the counter-cultural aspect of the Slutwalk. By crossing a highly touristic urban area, the Slutwalk attempted to give an alternative image of the city to the tourists who were present.

The non self-contained character of the demonstration was also grasped by the participants. Tasso, at the final plenary of the festival, narrated his experience when he tried, unsuccessfully, to grab some of the people looking at us and kiss them:

‘[It is important] mainly to speak with people...kiss a bit, go towards people. I tried to kiss someone, in general, maybe even kiss a bit in a way not at all catholic! Because we were also in front of a church. But a bit this thing of transmitting a bit the effects of the body, bodies that touch one another in a way that is not granted...So, relations with the city [are important].’<sup>73</sup>

Concerning the internal dimension of the demonstration, it was acknowledged that it fortified solidarity between gay and straight participants, since many straight activists from Teatro Valle took part in the demonstration. Tasso, for instance, during the final plenary, stressed the idea that having straight men and women from Teatro Valle inside the Slutwalk was one of the biggest achievements of the festival: ‘One of the big success was to have my comrades from the Teatro, take part in it, and queering the bodies, their identities. So, it means that maybe we achieved the goal’.

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<sup>73</sup> Original in Italian. The final assembly was recorded, transcribed and translated into English

Controversies however were also on the agenda. During the final plenary, Rachele regretted the dominance of some male comrades at the forefront of the demonstration, which contributed, according to her, to the invisibility of female participants:

‘There was masculine participation: not masculine bodies, but masculine modalities of being, I found. The issue is rape. And so the rape of female bodies. And the fact that there were assigned men reinforces also experimentation, because I believe in the contamination [...] so I was enthusiastic that we were mixed [males and females]. But there was a very strong masculine visibility [...] The impression I had was that the male presence was more visible politically than the female one’<sup>74</sup>

Rachele’s argument was rooted in the image of Slutwalk as a once-again male dominance over females. Her critique comes from the fact that it was a cis-boy who led the demonstration at the beginning. She does not regret the presence of males inside the Walk, yet she questions the hyper-visibility of the male body as once again the *leader* of the demonstration.

Beyond controversies regarding male masculinity and its representations, what Rachele and Tasso bring into the discussion is a crucial aspect of the performative logics of queer festivals: the politics of the body. Queers are supposed to see the body as a site of resistance, capable of putting at stake the normalized codes of gender and sexuality as they are established within society. Watching male bodies wearing miniskirts, and having excessive amounts of makeup, observing girls writing on their face ‘I am a whore’ challenges radically the idea of gender categorizations, while it brings to the surface issues considered non-political or private. When Tasso says that what was important was the transmission of ‘the effects of the body, bodies that touch one another in a way that is not granted’, this is what he refers to. On the other hand, the body holds the ability to provoke tensions and thus solidify the collective identity of the group. The over-representation of male bodies at the forefront creates false interpretations on the objective of the Slutwalk. As Jordan claims, every direct action placing the body at the forefront

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<sup>74</sup> Original in Italian. Translation mine. Rachele, April 2013, Rome, Final Assembly



‘highlights the body’s ability to signify both self and society’, while direct action itself becomes ‘the central strategy of creative resistance, a strategy that, unlike the rationality and objectivity of most politics, revokes the emphasis on words and reason and demands the acknowledgement of intuition and imagination’ (1998: 134-135). The politics of the body, with all the controversies it provokes, functions as a significant mode of publicity for queer festivals. The disembodied Habermasian notion of discourse becomes a circulation of a modality of erotic desire. Through demonstrations such as Slutwalks, queer desire turns public.

b. The Bibliotheque Erotique performance and its unexpected end: A performance within a performance

*Rome, Last Night. Angelo Mai Altrove squat. 22:00*

*The last night’s party is called Queer Shake. The party is open to everybody, regardless of prior participation in the festival. The Angelo squat being one squat out of many in Rome, the organizers are expecting various people from the broader squatting scene of the city. I wonder if many of them will have any idea about what queer politics means. The squat is divided into two building: one open space in which DJs and performers will act. The other, smaller one, functions as the squat’s bar, in which smaller performances, such as Bibliotheque Erotique, will take place.*

*[...]*

*The group Bibliotheque Erotique is one of the invited performance groups. They are based in Amsterdam. Half of its members, however, are Italians and hold some affiliations with the Roman queer scene. I had a short chat with one of the members, Gianni. He explained briefly their performance ideas. Their performances consist mainly of cabaret-oriented shows. They attempt to create an erotic atmosphere, reminiscent of the cabaret aesthetics of the 30s. They read extracts from erotic literature to the audience. They tend to address individually some of the audience by whispering in their ears, and touching them in a highly eroticized manner. The members who travelled in Rome for the performance were two girls and two boys.*

*[...]*

*23.00. The performance starts. Bar of the squat*

*The space is extremely crowded. People order drinks from the bar. Not of all them sit to watch the performance. There is a continuous noise coming from the bar, from people ordering drinks. The space is very bright. I believe this clashes with the supposed cabaret-atmosphere of the performance, as Gianni had described before. The performers are on stage. The girls are dressed in hyper-sexualized clothes; they wear thick, but not excessive makeup. One of the girls, Shiley, wears a black mini skirt and black tights. She also has two red bands, one around her head and the other around her middle. Gianni, my informant, wears a light blue dress. The other man of the group is dressed as a cabaret 'master of ceremonies', and he holds a whip. The noise does not die down. The performers decide to start a bit later. The two female performers sit on the sofa. The 'master of ceremonies' stands up holding his whip; he has a threatening look. Gianni starts reading an erotic poem in Italian. He speaks loudly trying to keep a sensuous tone. He walks around the stage very slowly. I am on the front seats together with some other queer activists from Amsterdam. Some people look very interested in watching the performance. The noise from the bar stays loud however. Impossible to concentrate. Suddenly, Shiley stands up, approaches a girl from the audience and starts whispering sensually in her ear. It is an extract she was reading from a book. The performers seem to be trying to concentrate on getting through the act as quickly as possible. Suddenly, in the middle of the performance, the bartenders start ringing bells. It is the last call for drinks before the bar and the small building of the squat close. The performers rush to end the show.*

Although disappointed by the bad organization and arrangement of the space, things suddenly took a different turn, with people from the audience engaging in a spontaneous sexual performance.

*Suddenly I see Saha standing up [a female member from the Queeristan festival, visitor from Amsterdam]. She was sitting in the front seats watching the Bibliotheque Erotique's performance, which was fading away. She grabs the whip from the 'master of ceremonies' and stars whipping her own butt. A friend of hers from the audience, Bebe, stands up, bends her over, takes the whip and starts whipping her*

*gently. The atmosphere becomes gradually more eroticized. A guy from the audience, Luca, steps next to Saha. He kneels down as if he was expecting whips from Bebe. He wears tight jeans, a T-shirt, and he also has two feminine silver earrings. Bebe starts interchanging whips, first to Saha and then to Luca. I see some other people from the audience getting curious about this improvised performance, which is completing the incomplete performance of Bibliotheque Erotique.*

*[...]*

*Suddenly Bebe invites me to whip Saha and Luca's bottoms. While I do, they both start kissing on the mouth. Another girl from the audience joins me and Bebe. Now, the three of us use the whip to spank the bottoms of this temporary-created couple.*

*[...]*

*This spontaneous performance ends after ten minutes, since the space has to close and the activists running the bar order everyone out.<sup>75</sup>*

The performance of *Bibliotheque Erotique* was in reality a sophisticated artistic idea to blur sexual and gender boundaries by suggesting an eroticized, cabaret-like, atmosphere. Their intentions to engage with their audience in a supposedly spontaneous, yet orchestrated, way manifest their whole idea of interactive performing. While the *Bibliotheque Erotique's* performance was fading away, however, a more spontaneous form of performance took place. This 'organic' show was initiated and developed by parts of the public. Taking advantage of the fadedness of the previous performance and profiting from the general confusion and noise that covered the space, Saha grabbed the whip from one of the performers, and started using it provocatively. The erotic atmosphere attempted by the previous 'official' performance created the terrain for another unprepared performance to emerge. Other people from the audience stood up and started participating in this sadomasochistic sexual game. Whatever the intentions of the people who initiated this spontaneous show, it led a boy and a girl, who identify as homosexuals in their everyday lives, to a passionate kiss. The goal of creating real sexual fluidity was achieved. One of the basic components of queer identity was performed at that moment.

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<sup>75</sup> Field Notes, Rome, April 2013

By not embracing totally the fixed categories of man-woman/gay-straight, queer actors engage, consciously or not, in a game of disidentification with the dominant understandings of gender and sexuality (Munoz, 1997); they performatively create hybrid identities by blurring the categories. When we all shout ‘we are sluts’, when explicitly identified male bodies ask ‘men not to rape our female bodies’, actors neither reject the identity of male (since they still dress as men), nor embrace it (since they act and speak as women). At the same time, when Luca and Saha perform the potentialities of sexual fluidity, even if their intention was just to provoke, as a respondent told me later, they nevertheless contribute to the building of an image in which destabilization of clear-cut sexual identities becomes real. These sorts of performances do not necessarily need to be directed as a show for people to understand, but take place in an organic manner. They become part of queer performativity. As Hardt and Negri argue:

‘(Q)ueer performativity is not limited to reproducing or reforming the modern social bodies...Queer politics is an excellent example of such a performative collective project of rebellion and creation. It is not really an affirmation of homosexual identities but the subversion of identity in general’ (2004: 200)

By leaving rational argumentation aside, both the Slutwalk and the shows at the Angelo Mai squat managed to build a counterpublic by engaging in ‘transgressive modes of rhetorical invention’ (: 252). Slutwalk, as external-oriented, and the performances at Angelo Mai, as internal-oriented performances, created their own publics, by communicating a message through their corporeal, performative styles. Furthermore, in both cases, many heterosexual people from the audience were exposed to this performative, queer ethos. As Luca and Saha’s performance demonstrated in the most explicit way (a sadomasochist eroticized model of two people -who in everyday life would be ‘incompatible’- kissing on the mouth), the publics that all these performances address are brought into existence through a corporeal style, which enacts the potentialities of sexual and gender fluidity. Performances can all be read as part of the performative repertoire that queer festivals engage with. Taking a more critical stance

however against Hardt and Negri's account of 'the subversion of identity' of performative politics (2004: 200), I align most strongly with Kosofsky-Sedwick. She writes that all performances, no matter how radical or mainstream they look, are 'kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic' (Kosofsky-Sedwick, 1993: 15). What matters is how and to what extent performative logics contributes to the shaping of an anti-identitarian identity, which gives shape in its turn to a queer counterpublic.

### 5.3.3 Autonomy, queer politics of commons and representative democracy

*3<sup>rd</sup> Day. Queeristan Festival. Amsterdam 2012*

*Workshop on the Commons*

*There are about 20 people gathered for the workshop. Four organizers, all of them students living in Amsterdam: 3 are doing their Master's and one her PhD; two come from Turkey, one from the Netherlands and the other from Poland; two men and two women. The setting of the workshop resembles an academic conference. There is a PowerPoint presentation to be displayed. The organizers distribute the outline of the presentations on paper, accompanied by a corpus of five texts: Isabell Lorey: Governmental precarization; Maurizio Lazzarati, Immaterial labour; Paolo Virn: The ambivalence of disenchantment; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri: The production of the common; Nick Dyer-Witheford, The circulation of the common. The organizers start by presenting themselves, the theme of the workshop, and announce that a discussion with the audience is foreseen at the end.*

*[...]*

*The audience seems to have diverse backgrounds. Many of them are PhD and master's students. There are two women, however, who self-identify as 'lower-class farmer' and 'illegal precarious mother'.*

*[...]*

*The discussion centres around the idea of the 'commons', as a specific social need, such as alimentation, and the Common, as a non-material shared good, without owners, such as language. Organizers claim that the Queeristan festival in Amsterdam belongs to the category of a 'space where the Common is produced'. In*

*this sense, they link it to similar contemporary social movements, which tend to 'transcend the nation-state' such as Occupy, and where 'thousands of social interactions take place'. Thus, the links of the Queeristan festival with other social movements are presented with slides. Apart from Occupy, the organizers engage theoretically with the Blockupy event, which is taking place at the same time in Frankfurt.*<sup>76</sup>

*[...]*

*The discussion then turns to the links of queer politics with more institutional gay-rights politics, represented, according to the organizers, by the LGBT movement. They claim that since 'the production of the Common should stay relatively open', queer, as an anti-identitarian political stance, fits with the political idea of the 'commons', because it is an open category. In contrast, they claim, traditional LGBT politics, which tend to focus on gay rights, have a very limited scope manifested in their identitarian logics, and therefore LGBT cannot be included within the category of 'commons'.*<sup>77</sup>

At the Queeristan festival of 2012 in Amsterdam, one of the most-enthusiastically supported workshops was entitled 'From precarity to the common: Proceeding from anti-capitalist struggles'. The workshop had as objective to 'explore recent discussions on the notion of the common in relation to anti-capitalist struggle'<sup>78</sup>. The rationale of the workshop was expressed as three basic points. The first was that queer politics needs sustained reflection on urgent points of resistance, and notions of community and autonomy. The workshop claimed that, central as they are in queer politics, these issues need to be debated through a new communist perspective. The other two points were based on reflections on the emergence of the 'precariat', and the reemergence of discourses on communism as a strategy to be used against dominant neo-liberal

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<sup>76</sup> The links of the activists with these parallel transnational social movements were also manifested in their own narratives. As Sergio, one of the workshop organizers, told me later: 'I had to go to Bloccupy, and [instead] I went to Queeristan because these people, it's this big contingency of overlapping radical emancipatory politics let's say. Plus, lots of forms of creative work, creativity, plus all kinds of, I can't say, broadly identity politics. But it's largely all kinds of queer, feminist...impression I'm having' (Amsterdam, May 2012)

<sup>77</sup> Field Notes, Amsterdam, May 2012

<sup>78</sup> <http://queeristan.org/2012/04/27/from-precarity-to-the-common-proceeding-from-anti-capitalist-struggles>

narratives. But what do ‘autonomy’ and the ‘commons’ refer to when they form part of queer festivals? And how can queer politics combine with representative democracy?

According to Katsiaficas, autonomy signifies three aspects: (a) independence from political parties and trade unions, (b) ‘politics of the first person’, (c) direct-democratic forms of decision-making (1997: 6-8). Following this line of thought, all three characteristics of autonomy apply to queer festivals. They explicitly proclaim independence of political parties; they conform to the ‘politics of the first person’ model through their feminist engagement, and finally, they organize according to direct-democratic consensus-based organizational forms.<sup>79</sup> If we see the three above-mentioned features as related more to the actual organization of queer festivals, there is another aspect of autonomy that can be brought into discussion. This idea of ‘autonomy’ refers to philosophical approaches as described by authors, such as Negri and Federici. I will explore this aspect of ‘autonomy’ in this section, connecting it to the imaginary that queer festivals build, regarding their identity-work.

Although the organizers of the workshop engaged very dynamically with the idea of the ‘commons’, in reality the idea was not significantly developed<sup>80</sup>, while the comprehension of its theoretical conceptualizations was restricted to a limited number of activists with specific academic training. In the meanwhile, only a minority of queer festivals seems to engage actively with discussions on the commons. The Queeristan festival can be seen as an illustrative example of how queer festivals can function as spaces in which their identity-work is fertilized by various processes of identity-building, one of those being the different political theories of the radical left, which are discussed in the spaces.

Queer festivals function therefore as spaces in which new political ideas can broaden the existing ideological framework, enriching its anti-identitarian narrative with new

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<sup>79</sup> This part will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6

<sup>80</sup> As I mentioned above, ‘the demands and strategies of queer politics are burdened by...*less articulate* but still powerful demands’ (Warner, 2005: 221) [*italics mine*]

theories. Queer theory does not any longer hold the ideological monopoly inside queer festivals, conceding space to other theories of the European radical left. In this case, it is crucial to explore what kinds of theoretical and ideological mixtures can emerge after fusing queer theory and theories on the commons. Responding to the claim of Gavin Brown that ‘little work has considered how lesbian-and-gay-focused (or appropriated) community resources might serve as a form of commons’ (2009: 1505), I claim that queer festivals and the way they are organized have the potential to offer a vision on the politics of ‘commons’. To some degree, the politics of ‘commons’ is already embedded within the prefigurative settings in which festivals take place. Thus, for instance ‘the sharing and gifting of skills, knowledge, and affection’ (Brown, 2009: 1505) constitutes one of the basic modes of address of the events. These modes of address are not directly mediated through deliberation and discursive ethics. They rather open the path for more skill sharing and affective relations to emerge. Many examples could be mentioned at this point: the bike-repairing spaces, the collective cooking and eating, the support with accommodation. Moreover, the whole political economy of the festivals is based on a certain idea of commons. Thus, communal kitchens, for instance, are based on food products offered by local neighbouring commerce, or through the process of dumpster-diving in big supermarket chains.

In addition, the specific organization pattern of the queer festivals on a DIY basis blurs the boundaries between organizers and ‘consumers’, albeit without, as we will see in chapter 6, avoiding the configuration of new power relations. The squatted spaces which host the queer festivals offer the possibilities for queer events to create community resources and to link with other social movements which are also part of the scene. Finally, the transnational character of the festivals allows activists who acquire or share skills to take them back to their ‘home’ communities.

Regarding the anti-identitarian ethos of queer festivals, I find extremely interesting the fact that the organizers of the ‘commons’ workshop *reified* the idea of queer being different from ‘traditional’ LGBT politics, by using this time the argument of the



‘commons’. According to the workshop’s organizers, identitarian sexuality cannot integrate into the category of the commons, because this needs an anti-identitarian framework in order to fertilize and proceed to collaborations with other social movements.

Cross-fertilization with queer ideas can also function at the external level, regarding the discursive limits of representative democracy. The two following examples from Rome and Copenhagen are illustrative cases of the connections between oppositional discourses and their place in democratic processes.

Daniele Ferranti was a candidate for the municipal elections which took place in Rome in June 2013. He was candidate for the left group Repubblica Romana. Daniele was also one of the main organizers of the queer festival in Rome some months before the elections. He produced some posters for his electoral campaign. One of those had as its main slogan: ‘Me dici frocio, te dico Ferranti’ (You say faggot. I say Ferranti). The slogan was based on the discursive game of the group Repubblica Romana whose main slogan was: ‘Me dici sinistra, te dico Repubblica Romana’ (‘You call left, I call Repubblica Romana’) (see Appendix 1, Picture 5). The use of the word ‘frocio’ (‘faggot’) as a self-identification in an institutional political process cannot be dissociated from Daniele’s links with the queer festival, and queer politics in general, and the continuity of the links between the counterpublic and the institutional political processes.

Recent as they may sound, the links between queer discourses and institutional politics can be traced back much further. In Denmark, where the Copenhagen queer festival is one of the oldest and longest in Europe, queer groups had already attempted to mix with politics through institutional elections. In contrast to Daniele Ferranti in Rome, however, queer activists in Copenhagen did things in a more collective way. The Queer Committee of the Red-Green Alliance, Denmark’s left-wing party par excellence, is an illustrative example of the continuity between the counterpublic and institutional state processes. As Liv Mertz, one of its members, described:

‘[The Queer Committee] immediately attracted a relatively large number of non-party members. Some of them were academics like myself or academics-to-be who had been identifying as socialists all along, but who had no experience working within the framework of a political party. Others were LGBT activists, while others yet were affiliated with radical left-wing initiatives like *Ungdomshuset* or feminist grassroots groupings... or all of the above. In short, the Queer Committee is the closest I have ever come to witnessing and participating in ‘the mutual interdependencies of social movements and academic theories’ – to the point where the definitional boundaries between the two dissolve. Thanks to ØQ [Queer Committee], I have often left the Red-Green Alliance’s gigantic first floor apartment contemplating academic theories that had been *refined* rather than simplified in the course of my evening there. And characteristically, my sporadic academic output is very often prompted by discussions and experiences shared by my ØQ comrades’.

(2008: 23)

The Queer Committee did not function without barriers and without discursive misunderstandings. It managed, however, according to Mertz, to introduce legislation on transgender rights in 2007, while its popularity was attested through reportages published on the party’s bimonthly bulletin (2008: 32)

To the questions, however, of how sexuality itself could be ‘commoned’ or how the ‘commons’ could be queered, and what this signifies for the anti-identitarian framework, answers are not easy, and the arguments are ongoing. On the one hand, queering the commons would imply the building of a new form of sexual practice and collective experience, which escapes from urban life, as mediated by capitalist commercial relations. In addition, as Warner contends ‘autonomy requires more than civil liberty; it requires the circulation and accessibility of sexual knowledge, along with the public elaboration of a social world that can make less alienated relations possible’ (2000: 171). Therefore, the free circulation of sexual knowledge and an escape from the heteronormative and gender-binary frameworks which every educational structure is

promoting would be a step forward in the ‘commoning’ of queerness. It could also signify a radical expansion of the discursive construction of institutional political mechanisms. Incorporating non-binary gender identifications and setting an agenda of transgender rights are examples of how queer politics can influence the institutional political scene. At the micro-level, and based on the idea of queer festivals as prefigurative spaces, which negotiate the commons, there are illustrative examples. Experiments such as sex parties, but also sexual performances, which end up in spontaneous unexpected sexual actions, and the BDSM [Bondage, Discipline, Sado-Masochism] space at some queer festivals embrace, theoretically, the fundamentals for the process of ‘commoning’ queerness.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the process of identity-work which takes place in queer festivals, from the viewpoint of discursive and performative enactments. Through the discussion on three essential dimensions of festivals’ identity-work processes, I concluded that queer festivals attempt to build an anti-identitarian identity, through different rhetoric styles, manifested in inclusivity, differentiation from the LGBT movement, performative politics and discourses on autonomy and the commons. Moreover, through collective actions, queer festivals attempt to reify a specific distinctiveness against mainstream publics (Bernstein, 1997), thus setting the bases for counterpublics to emerge.

My analysis in this chapter demonstrates that queer festivals in Europe shape counterpublics, basically for two reasons. First, they attempt to build an identity which is based on the challenge of dominant discourses on gender and sexuality. Second, for this, they advance new styles of rhetoric, which move beyond the Habermasian rational-critical framework of discourse. Queer festivals thus do not build rational frames in order to maximize their attendances. Their identity-work is primarily located in the

construction of an anti-identitarian ethos, defined as the distinctive character which translates into ‘the corresponding expression of [individuals’] standardized affective aspects’ (Bateson, 1958: 33). Therefore, ethos should be viewed as inextricably linked to the affective and normative dispositions of the queer festivals’ identity-work.

In order to distinguish analytically the dimensions which are present in the identity-work of queer festivals, I regrouped them broadly as follows: a. The anti-identitarian aspect, b. Performative politics, c. Autonomy and the politics of commons. For each of these parts, I used material from the field, which fitted best in the analysis.

First, the discourse of moving beyond sexual and gender identities is that dimension of queer festivals’ identity-work which links them to the historical legacy of queer politics, as it developed after the 80s, and to their ideological legacy of queer theory, as it developed in the American universities during the same period. By using a discourse which opposes rigid and fixed identities in order to promote fluidity in the forms that gender and sexuality can take, queer festivals conform to the model of queer theory as it was built within universities after the late 80s. I showed how this discursive legacy is portrayed in the callouts of the festivals when they address an unknown public, thus setting the first demarcation points for the construction of the boundaries of collective identity. I also demonstrated that the anti-identitarian discourse is enriched by a narrative of inclusivity, conforming to the multiple-identities legacy of the alterglobalization movement’s anti-authoritarian scene. Concerning activists’ interpretations on the matter, they tend to repeat this anti-identitarian idea, basically combining it with a sense of an ‘alternative’ lifestyle, a counter-culture which is ‘different’ from the mainstream gay one.

Second, performative politics functions as a tactical mode in queer festivals’ repertoire of action. Building on older repertoires, queer festivals in Europe engage with performances and theatrical modes of contention, in order to challenge dominant cultural sexual and gender codes. By analysing the Slutwalk in Rome, and two other performances which took place during the same festival, I demonstrated how politics on the basis of

performance, putting the body at the forefront, reinvigorates the idea of social movements, which are usually seen as formations based on rational argumentation and critical voices, in Habermasian terms. Performances assist in expanding discursive space, not only at the level of content, but also at the level of style. They help festivals in recognizing, and at the same time overcoming the exclusions they face from the official public sphere, because of their use of specific speaking styles which do not conform to the idea of rational-critical argumentation (Asen, 2000: 438), and thus to the broader political discussions.

Third, European queer festivals are making a gradual attempt to situate themselves discursively within the autonomous sphere of politics, while their political practices are engaging intensely with the idea of the ‘commons’. The very idea of organizing on a DIY mode, which blurs the boundaries between organizers and ‘consumers’, while allowing for a new material politics of sharing, as well as the creation and circulation of new modes of intimacy and sociality, such as sexual experimentations and learning, creation of affective bonds, and friendship networks, all have the potential for the creation of a queer commons. At the same time, their fragmented but continuing influence on institutional politics can become the basis on which we can start to reconsider how we can *queerize* representative democracy.

These are the three main dimensions upon which queer festivals locate their identity-work. How does the construction, however, of this identitarian framework link to the emergence of queer counterpublics? By building their counterpublic through different discursive styles, festivals do not deny as irrelevant their collective identity. But this identity does not derive from a supposedly subordinate status of participants, as Fraser would argue. It is rather built upon identification with the specific styles that queer festivals use in order to build their counterpublics.

As I showed at the beginning of the chapter, even if Fraser introduces the notion of counterpublics as oppositional arenas against dominant discourses, she does not break free from the same legacy she attacks, since the opposition she claims is merely defined

by the content of these discourses. She tends to ignore those styles of political communication which go beyond the critical-rational frameworks of Habermasian logics. Therefore, activities such as body politics and performances are absent from her definition of a counterpublic. Approaching queers as counterpublics allows us however to expand our idea of what a counterpublic, and its political role, actually is, since queer festivals advance styles of political communication beyond deliberative forms of communication. These styles include: performances, and sexual shows, and transgressive gender aesthetics. What Warner describes as ‘poetic world making’ is very relevant to our discussion:

‘The point here is that this perception of public discourse as conversation obscures the importance of the poetic functions of both language and corporeal expressivity in giving a particular shape to publics. The public is thought to exist empirically and to require persuasion rather than poesis’ (2002: 82)

Queer festivals do not interact directly with policy makers, with national authorities or international organizations. The politics they suggest is strongly connected with their own identity-work: moving beyond binaries. Rational as it might sound, queer festivals suggest new forms of living and heuristic forms of conducting politics. Performativity is one of those. These modes of performing politics cannot be described as deliberative. As the Slutwalk demonstrated, there is the tendency to perform more confrontational kinds of activities both at the legal (ex. unauthorized demonstrations) and the cultural level (kiss-ins in front of churches etc.). This idea of confrontational politics is also connected to the prefigurative frame of the whole queer idea: activists attempt to build poetically the world they want to inhabit. Poetics, as described by Warner, is an ironic term: not true poetry, but something that is removed ‘from anything, that could be described as elevated, refined or magisterial’ (Farmer, 2013: 64). The SlutWalk in this sense is an illustrative example. That some passersby considered it vulgar and aggressive just confirms the idea of ‘poetic’ as an action far from being ‘refined’. Thus, queer does not aspire to be kind, polite or deliberative. The slogan of the Rome queer festival ‘We are here, we are queer. We riot’ is an illuminating example (See Appendix 1. Picture 2).

The approach which sees queer festivals as arenas which shape counterpublics does not signify that queer festivals are located completely outside the official public sphere; or that their discourses are completely incoherent and irrational. In fact, it is only a sign that festivals are located somewhere in-between the ideological legacy of the Habermasian public sphere, and autonomous marginalized subcultures. In reality, queer festivals are not so marginalized from the official public sphere, as appears at first glance. Festivals do not merely suggest new discursive styles, such as performative politics, material skill-sharing, and the squatting ethos. They also attempt to build more coherent identities through the mobilization of political theories, as they are formulated and circulate within academic institutions. People holding high cultural capital tend to bring in approaches from the theoretical debates of left-wing politics, and disseminate them within the festivals. Although queer theory constitutes one of the authoritative ideological holders of the events' identity, new political ideas are gradually introduced. These ideas originate from theories on autonomy and the commons. Therefore, a certain degree of rationalization of queer festivals is currently underway, promoted mainly by activists with high cultural capital, socialized within academic institutions. This midway position of queer festivals, between the official public sphere and alternative counterpublics, is very relevant for further discussions on the cultural practices deployed by the festivals.

## Chapter 6

### Queering Transnationalism

#### 6.1 Introduction

*Da Mieli a Queer Festival, Teatro Valle, Rome, 06 April 2013*

*11:30*

*It is time for the workshop 'Bridging the gap in a queer Europe-Oltre la dicotomia teoria/pratica'. The Queeristan crew from Amsterdam comes on stage to present the group and share their experiences. The crew is composed of five people, all living in Amsterdam: Tobin (Dutch), Korin (Swedish), Gianni, Stefi (Italians), and Danna (Puerto Rican). Tobin and Korin start presenting Queeristan in English, showing slides from their actions in Amsterdam. Gianni and Stefi translate into Italian.*

*[...]*

*Now Andrea Gilbert comes from the organization team of Athens Pride. Her first words are: 'Athens Pride is not a queer organization' (Why does she say this? I wonder). She gives some contextual information on gay politics in Greece. She claims that gay rights are almost nonexistent in the country. She stresses the recent uprising of Golden Dawn<sup>81</sup>, as an obstacle to gay rights implementation. I notice her almost native level of English.*

*[...]*

*It's the turn of Paulo and Ines. They will present the queer group Panteras Rosas from Lisbon.<sup>82</sup>*

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<sup>81</sup> Golden Dawn is one of the most extremist far-right political parties in Europe with Neo-Nazi inclinations. It secured '6.92 per cent, 425,990 votes and 18 seats in the June 2012 Greek elections. Despite the association of GD with violence, subsequent polls have shown the party reaching 11–12 per cent'.(Ellinas, 2013: 544)

<sup>82</sup> Field Notes, Rome, April 2013



Queer festivals become spaces where a set of discourses circulates and specific political practices are promoted. Their political agency is manifested in their ability to offer interpretations of their identities and needs, as opposed to 'a comprehensive public sphere imbued with dominant interests and ideologies'. (McLaughlin, 2004: 160; Fraser, 1997: 81). They are subject to processes of exclusion, not because of their argumentative content, but also because of the styles they choose with which to convey their messages. It is precisely these exclusionary processes that build festivals as counterpublic spheres.

In addition to their counterpublic character, queer festivals have visions of participating in the transnational political arena. Similarly to other social movements, queer festivals form part of cross-border coalitions, with cultural and political targets beyond national borders. These coalitions are manifested in activists and allies travelling from different countries in order to participate in the gatherings. All such transnational movements-as they are called- share common characteristics, but they present at the same time major differences, particularly regarding their relations and the degrees of links to the states, to international organizations, and to official public spheres in which they participate. Queer festivals are thus not exclusively embedded in the national public spheres in which they are assumed to participate.

In this chapter, I will explore how queer festivals function as arenas which provide the possibility for *transnational counterpublics* to emerge. I will proceed to this exploration through an analysis of the specific practices which form these space. The departure point is the view that transnationalism is not only a discursive strategy of a political event. Thus, the transnational character of an event should not be limited to its narrative-building, but should rather be seen as a formation gradually built through specific mechanisms. The transnational character of a political event is thus always *under construction*. (Juris, 2008: 210). Therefore, it is the setting in motion of all these practices which allows festivals to *transnationalize* their publics.

The transnational character is inextricably linked to the logics of queer politics in general. Queer is imagined as a post-national/anti-nationalist identity, going against any sort of *borders*. Borders have been used extensively in the queer literature, to indicate not only the national lines dividing the globe into countries. The ideology of borders has a much more complicated agenda, covering broadly the idea of gender and sexual borders, as they are maintained through identities. Thus, moving beyond borders forms inevitably part of the queer agenda, and that of its feminist branch (Anzaldúa, 1999). This pertains to the sexual/gender level, but also to any other border-operating mechanisms, one of those being the nation as unit of political activism (Spurlin, 2013: 71)<sup>83</sup>.

I will start with a brief theoretical overview of transnational politics, as debated in social movement studies. I will then explore those mechanisms through which queer festivals build transnational counterpublics; in other words, which are the practices that make them transnational arenas, and therefore give birth to transnational counterpublics. For this exploration, I will make use of four set of practices, and will use these as analytical categories : language, networks, political trajectories and digital communication.

## **6.2 Moving transnationalism one step forward: A theoretical overview**

Sidney Tarrow is one of the first to combine transnationalism with social movement studies (2001; 2005). Being more interested in contentious movements, Tarrow conceptualized ‘transnational contention’ as ‘conflicts that link transnational activists to one another, to states, and to international institutions’ (2005: 25).<sup>84</sup> Della Porta and Tarrow use a similar definition in their study on ‘Transnational protest and global

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<sup>83</sup> There is a growing literature on the intersections between queer theory and nationalist studies, which demonstrates how nations are built upon certain ideas of manhood and masculinity, and tend to exclude ‘others’ on grounds of their sexuality from the national body. The special issue ‘Queering Nations and Nationalism’ (2013) in the journal *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* is one relevant example of this recent trend.

<sup>84</sup> Or, as he explains in 2001, transnational social movements are ‘socially mobilized groups with constituents in at least two states, engaged in sustained contentious interactions with power-holders in at least one state other than their own, or against an international institution, or a multinational economic actor’ (Tarrow, 2001: 11; della Porta, 2005: 177)

activism', by defining transnational collective actions as 'coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states, or international institutions' (2005: 2-3). Concerning Europe, in particular, these transnational processes are part of the political changes occurring in the continent after the late 80s and intensifying after the early 00s. (della Porta and Tarrow, 2005: 7). These processes have taken the name of 'Europeanization', and the mobilization of social movement actors affected by Europeanization as 'Europeanization from below' (della Porta and Caiani, 2007).

However, concerning specifically transnational network-based feminist/gender and sexuality movements, the literature on how transnationalism operates in Europe is rather limited.<sup>85</sup> The challenge of the political claims of dominant sexual and gender norms, and of the blurring and destabilization of identities as a political practice, is little understood, especially in the context of a rapidly transnationalizing Europe. Scholars working on oppositional/countercultural and horizontally networked forms of contention have developed a mechanism which attributes to them a transnational character, despite the lack of a distinct target addressed by the state, or other international bureaucratic institutions (Alvarez, 1997; Escobar, 2001; Juris, 2008; Olesen, 2005). As Jeffrey Juris claims in his study on anti-corporate globalization networks, these decentralized oppositional formations are movements which do not have any 'coordinated actions against fixed targets' (2008: 201)<sup>86</sup>.

Juris' claim about oppositional formations is directly linked to the idea of 'counterpublics'. I have already demonstrated that Fraser's concept of 'subaltern

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<sup>85</sup> There is growing interest in transnational policy-oriented LGBT movements, such as ILGA-Europe [International Lesbian and Gay Association] (Paternotte, 2012; Ayoub and Paternotte, 2012), IGLYO [International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Youth and Student Organisation] (Vella, Nowotnick, Selun, and Van Roozendaal, 2009), and also in how Europeanization shapes local LGBT activism, especially in post-communist Europe (Binnie and Klesse, 2012; O'Dwyer and Schwartz, 2010).

<sup>86</sup> Based on the Habermasian definition of the public sphere, Guidry, Kennedy, and Zald refer to 'transnational social movements' as 'transnational public spheres' (2000). In their definition, the 'transnational public sphere' is the 'space in which both residents of distinct places (states or localities) and members of transnational entities (organizations or firms) elaborate discourses and practices whose consumption moves beyond national boundaries' (Guidry, Kennedy and Zald, 2000: 6-7)

counterpublics’ has constituted the main critique against the notion of the bourgeois public sphere promoted by Habermas (Fraser, 1992)<sup>87</sup>. More recently, her idea has been enriched by that of the process of ‘transnationalism’ (Fraser, 2007). In fact, Fraser views transnationalism as a new parameter within which to rethink the nation-state beyond the nationally-bound Westphalian definition of the public sphere:

‘In *Structural Transformation* [Habermas, 1989], publics correlate with modern territorial states and national imaginaries. To be sure, the national aspect went largely unthematized in this work’ (2007: 10)

The territorially bounded public sphere should coincide with other cultural processes, such as the use of a national language and of national media:

‘Habermas envisioned a deliberative model of democracy that was situated squarely within it. In this model, democracy requires the generation, through territorially bounded processes of public communication, conducted in the national language and relayed through the national media, of a body of national public opinion’ (Fraser, 2007: 11)

The transnational public spheres, in contrast, are ‘trans-territorial and can neither be located within Westphalian space nor resolved by a Westphalian state’ (Fraser, 2007: 14). Fraser argues that issues such as women’s rights, the environment, terrorism, the neoliberal direction of the market and the conglomeration and diffusion of international media should enhance the criticism of the nationally bound public sphere.

Since public spheres can become transnational, the construction of ‘transnational counterpublics’ is unavoidable, through processes of structural exclusions, as was the case with Westphalian public spheres:

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<sup>87</sup> As Fraser points out, ‘members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians—have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics’ (1992: 122-123), since ‘the bourgeois public sphere was based on systematic exclusions’ of these subordinated groups (Juris, 2008: 336). For more information, see the Introduction

‘I claimed [in 1990] that the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics could enhance the participation of subordinate strata in stratified societies. Exposing, too, the bourgeois masculinist bias in standard liberal views of what counts as a public concern, I endorsed efforts by movements such as feminism to redraw the boundaries between public and private. Yet this critique presupposed the national-territorial understanding of publicity. Far from challenging the Westphalian frame, it aimed to enhance the legitimacy of public opinion within it’ (Fraser, 2007: 12-13)

Although Fraser does not proceed further, she sets the frame for additional reflection on how counterpublics are equally subject to the exclusions and post national political arrangements of transnational public spheres.

In order to understand better how queer festivals function, and what kind of identities they attempt to create, we should take into serious consideration their aspirations and the mechanisms which establish their position in the transnational public sphere. Through their appeal to an international public, queer festivals are organized not on the same basis as formal organizations, but through ‘arenas where transnational counterpublics can emerge’ (Juris, 2008: 203). These counterpublics are physically embodied. As Juris suggests, instead of approaching network formations already constituted, I chose to study the specific mechanisms through which these networks are constructed in practice (2008: 210). In a similar vein, Dufour talks about ‘practices’ which shape ‘transnational solidarities’; thus, transnational solidarities are not constructed a priori, but they are rather the consequence of practices (2010: 103). Dufour’s idea of ‘practices’ as a departure point allows us see how queer festivals, apart from being built as counterpublic arenas, are equally constituted as *transnational* arenas. This transnational constitution of festivals is built with the support of specific mechanisms, which I will call *practices* from now on. It is the setting in motion of these specific practices that gives shape to queer festivals in Europe, and allows for the construction of transnational queer counterpublics. These cross-border practices are both physical and digital. They share a common characteristic, however, to the extent that they shape physical, *embodied*

counterpublics, and not digital ones. Therefore, queer festivals function as physical arenas where embodied, queer transnational counterpublics emerge.

The practices which make the festivals arenas for the shaping of transnational counterpublics, are equally important for the construction of the anti-identity narrative of queer identity. It is crucial therefore to approach them theoretically, and include them in the sets of other discursive, organizational, and cultural practices which shape the festivals' identity-work. The processes of construction are open and incomplete. Networks are becoming 'confusing' (Juris, 2008: 211). By creating these transnational arenas, queer activists come to align themselves with their ideological framework and their anti-identitarian ethos. The idea of going beyond sexual and gender borders fits very clearly with that of moving beyond national frontiers, as the Queeristan's slogan 'No border, No nation' in Amsterdam illustrates very emphatically. Thus, the problematization of the politics of borders is very well embedded, both in the queer anti-identitarian ethos, but also in the broader anti-border political discussions which are currently taking place in Europe.

Transnational arenas do not escape criticism. The location of the spaces in Western European 'creative capitals' (Peck, 2005: 740) means that they fail to attract people from Eastern European countries, or people with migrant backgrounds. Part of a broader implementation of these capitals' 'hipsterization strategies' (ibid), queer festivals tend to attract actors with high cultural capital, living in or travelling around the wealthy capitals of the Global North. Moreover, travelling to one of these transnational arenas could be imagined as part of a *cosmopolitan* way of performing politics, even elitist. This observation will be seen to verify the assumption in Chapter 1 that the 'counter' in the queer festivals is characteristic of the political standpoint, rather than of the socio-educational background of the participants.

I divided cross-border practices into four categories: language, composition of the organization committees and of participants, activists' links with other social movements,

and finally digital communication and new forms of sociality. I chose these four sets of practices as illustrative analytical categories which blur the boundaries between strategic and contingent, in order to avoid binary dilemmas, between ‘acting’ and ‘feeling’ transnational, and between strategy and practice (Favell et al., 2011: 19).

I will start with a brief introduction to the setting, as observed through the survey I conducted at the Oslo queer festival in 2011. I then proceed to the analysis of the four sets of practices. I will conclude by affirming that transnational expands rather than limits the anti-identitarian idea of queer festivals. The blurring of borders is part of the whole narrative construction of festivals’ attempts to deconstruct. Thus, the transnational character of the festivals seems to align with the whole queer ideology and its normative assumptions. The transnational character of the arenas will be seen to verify once again the position of ‘subalternity’ of the queer counterpublics. Queers are subalterns in their political standpoints, rather than in their material and educational backgrounds and resources. Limits of this transnationalism will be acknowledged.

### **6.3 Survey results**

In the survey I conducted at the Oslo queer festival of 2011, I collected data on the geographical origins of the participants and on their actual country of residence. Although the sample is only from Oslo, it marks a specific trend in queer festivals: many people across Europe travel to the cities where festivals take place in order to participate. Taking into account that Oslo is the most geographically isolated city of all the queer festivals of my field, I could confidently generalize the results for cities which are located in more central positions in Europe.

To begin with, I asked two questions concerning geography<sup>88</sup>. The first was: ‘In what city and country were you born?’ and the second: ‘In what city and country do you live now?’

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<sup>88</sup> For the rest of the results, see the Introduction

The objective was double: to identify the geographical constituency of the festivals and confirm my observation about people who travel in order to attend the events. In both questions, I expected a largely transnational constituency. Both results confirmed my expectations.

In the first question, ‘In what city and country were you born?’, fewer than half of the respondents replied that they were born in Norway (46.2%); 46% were born in another European country, and 7.7% in Asia. The composition of the representation of European countries reflects the geographical location of Oslo. Thus, the majority from European countries were born in Sweden, Iceland and the UK, while participants from Italy, Germany, France and Greece were also present.

Although these results reveal a clearly transnational trend, those regarding the actual place of residence confirm this to a lesser degree. In fact, 59.3 % of the respondents lived currently in Norway (Oslo and the rest of the country), and the rest in different European countries: 22.2% in Sweden, 7.4 % in the UK, and 11.1% in Iceland, Austria and Italy. It becomes obvious that many foreigners living in Norway participate in the festivals. Comparing this with the former results, together with the professional occupations (see Chapter 3), we could confidently assert that the majority of participants are highly skilled, with high cultural capital, and form part of intra-European migration.

#### **6. 4 Building transnational counterpublics through practices**

Queer festivals, as locations where new collective identities are generated and ‘transnational solidarities’ created (Dufour, 2010: 103), are shaped through the realization of specific practices. These practices are performed *through cross-border* action: physical and digital. This section describes the different ways in which the idea of the queer festival as a transnational arena is materialized, thus giving birth to transnational counterpublics, by emphasizing their construction through the setting in motion of



specific cross-border practices. I divided these practices into four analytical categories: language, composition of the organization committees and participants, links with other leftist movements and cultures, and digital communication.

#### 6.4.1 Language

##### *1. Queeristan festival, May 20, 2012*

*Op De Valreep Squat, Amsterdam*

*The workshop 'Queer activism and class' is ready to start. I have been preparing it since last night. There are around 15 people. I invite them to sit on the floor in a circle. As people take their seats, I am told by a festival organizer that three members from Spain wanted to participate in the workshop, having however a very poor understanding of English. Sara, a Greek girl, also from the festival's organization, is standing next to us, and takes the initiative to make a direct translation into Spanish for these members. Apparently she speaks both English and Spanish fluently. The Spanish people and Sara move to the back in the room. She translates to them in Spanish quietly, while I start speaking.<sup>89</sup>*

##### *2. Oslo queer festival, September 23, 2011*

*Hausmania Squat, Oslo*

*I am going to take part in a workshop on safe sex practices. I am already late; the workshop has already started. I enter the room. The presenter carries on speaking in Norwegian. I raise my hand. I say I do not speak Norwegian. I ask him if the conversation could instead take place in English. He immediately changes his presentation to English, without expressing any negative comment whatsoever.<sup>90</sup>*

One of the strategic aims of queer festivals is to address an international public. This aim is achieved primarily through the use of English. Its use, and additional linguistic arrangements, are important because they exemplify festivals' attempt to build a public,

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<sup>89</sup> Field Notes, Amsterdam, May 2012

<sup>90</sup> Field Notes, Oslo, September 2011

which extends beyond the limits of the national public sphere. Language helps to address an international public, while enhancing ‘inclusive deliberation’ supported by the organizers’ logistical arrangements (Doerr, 2009).

This aim is clearly achieved, as became clear from the results of the survey, which proved festivals’ international constituency. English becomes the lingua franca for internal and external communication. There is however the attempt on the part of the queer organizers to try to include non-English speakers as well. Since 2013, for instance, the queer festivals of Amsterdam and Berlin<sup>91</sup> have displayed their call-outs in multiple languages, non-European migrants’ languages included:

‘The call set out is available in other languages including: Nederlands, Deutsch, Español, Português, Italiano, عربي, & Türkçe. Please specify if you will be conducting your workshop in a language other than English so we could connect you with community translators’ (Amsterdam, 2013).<sup>92</sup>

Queer festivals attempt to enlarge their potential public at the local and the international level. At the international level, they write their callouts in English and other western European languages (French, German, and Spanish mainly). At the local level, they use the local language of the city in which the festival takes place. At the same time, they add local migrant languages, such as Turkish and Arabic, as part of their broader strategy of inclusion, to attract members of these communities.

Callouts function primarily as means to attract newcomers by setting the basis for festivals’ identity-work (see Chapter 4). Although they cannot be known in advance, these new members of the public need to participate, to a certain degree, in the discourse which produces the callout (Warner, 2002: 56). In other words, the potential addressees need to be familiar with a sort of queer discourse. This happens mainly through socialization at the local level, or the participation in a digital network in which

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<sup>91</sup> <http://quear.blogspot.eu/en/call/>

<sup>92</sup> <http://queeristan.org/2013/02/24/queeristan-2013-call-out/#dutch>

information circulates. At the socialization level, newcomers are usually friends or acquaintances of people already part of the festivals, or people participating in the leftist/squatting scenes of the cities in which queer festivals take place. At the digital level, potential new members of the public ideally participate in networks in which relevant information is diffused.

Beyond the callouts, which have an important discursive potential for inclusivity, queer festivals try to create mechanisms of linguistic inclusion at the level of organizational practice too. Due to lack of financial resources, and based on the DIY ethos, organizers attempt to establish translations on an ad hoc basis, asking for support from participants. These mechanisms are therefore less organized than in other political transnational events, such as the European social forums (Doerr, 2009). The above example from the Queeristan festival in Amsterdam is revealing as to the organization of ad hoc translation provision when the need arises.

Awareness of linguistic diversity brings particular benefits to the festivals, since it allows for the building of broader multilingual audiences, thus setting the basis for wider inclusive deliberation. Similar linguistic mechanisms permit transnational political events to be more inclusive than nationally based ones, in which a single linguistic format is usually applied. As Nicole Doerr describes in the case of European social forums,

‘Inclusive deliberation in the European meetings could be an outcome of the multilingual working practices in these European meetings compared to single language formats in national social forum meetings’ (2009: 93).

Following this line of thought, multilingual activist environments are capable of generating inclusiveness, since they enhance communication and comprehension of the political context for a larger majority of activists, without however imposing a single unified linguistic code. Although it has been noted that language barriers can constitute a disadvantage for the construction of a European public sphere (Offe, 2003), queer activists, like their predecessors of the alterglobalization movement and the European

social forums, have developed strategies to remove, to the greatest possible extent, these barriers.

The logistical arrangements, however, of queer festivals and of European social forums are different. In contrast to the latter's extensive use of technical infrastructure and skilled personnel, with assured continuous translation through systems such as Babel (Doerr, 2009), queer festivals, because of scarcity of material resources, negotiate multilingualism in a purely interpersonal way, supported by the organizers of the events.

Although multilingualism is a *de facto* situation in the interactions between participants, the 'official' tendency is the use of English as *lingua franca*. All the basic organized activities of the events take place in English: daily plenaries and workshops are indicative examples. Equally, the texts circulating within the spaces are also in English: fanzines, flyers, programmes, advertising posters, rules, and prices of drinks are displayed in English, together with local languages. Personal interactions adapt to the common languages of the people involved, although English is considered the common language *par excellence*. Examples from everyday interactions in the festivals confirm this, as I demonstrated with the above example from the Oslo festival. The queer festival in Rome was the only exception. In this festival, Italian was the predominant language of the event. Translation into English, however, was assured by the organizing committee, in order to create an inclusive space for non-Italian speakers.

This does not mean that communication and multilingualism do not generate tensions. During my observation, I noticed some concerns from the activists regarding the widespread use of English. Some participants share this observation. As Kate, an Australian participant at the Oslo queer festival, put it: 'as an English speaker, I see that some are uncomfortable with that'<sup>93</sup>. People coming from countries where English is not widely taught and spoken (e.g. Spain and the Ukraine) might have some difficulty in following the everyday interactions or the workshops and performances.

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<sup>93</sup> Intervention in the workshop 'Queer activism and Academia', Oslo, 25 September 2011

Another concern regarding linguistic practices relates to the use of specific ‘queer’ academic jargon<sup>94</sup>. Terms such as, ‘heteronormativity’<sup>95</sup>, ‘cis’<sup>96</sup> or ‘essentialist’ circulate within the everyday discussions during the festivals, constituting a fundamental part of the theoretical toolkit used in the workshops. The problem is that activists with no extensive knowledge of gender studies do not always feel comfortable with these academic terms. This connection between gender studies jargon and queer activism thus becomes a recurrent issue of discussion within the festivals. As Tobin, a member of the organization committee of the Queeristan festival in Amsterdam, and a PhD candidate in cultural analysis, says:

‘The majority of queer theory is presented and published in English. So, it’s also like we organize things here only in English. So, that also already appeals that, sort of interpellates [addresses] international, transnational audience’ (Amsterdam, May 2012)

Vladimir, an employee in a call centre in Berlin, who came to the Copenhagen festival, with a basic understanding of queer studies, said:

‘Yesterday [On the second day of the Copenhagen festival] for example, I realized I was the only person in the... maybe one of the only persons in the room, who didn’t know a term, which was very important [*He is not confirming if it is the word. I am asking him*]... ‘cis’”(Copenhagen, July 2011)

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<sup>94</sup> See Chapter 7 for more details

<sup>95</sup> ‘Heteronormativity’ describes ‘the set of norms that make heterosexuality seem natural or right and that organize homosexuality as its binary opposite’. (Valocchi, 2005: 756).

<sup>96</sup> The word ‘cis’ or ‘cisgender’, a neologism used widely in queer activist and theoretical contexts, is used ‘[instead of the more popular ‘gender normative’] to refer to people who do not identify with a gender diverse experience, without enforcing existence of a “normative” gender expression’ (Green, 2006: 247)

Gem, an Israeli queer activist, living in Berlin, said at the beginning of her narration:

‘The queer part came after, like learning more about gender. Maybe I’m the only one you interviewed that didn’t study gender studies (laugh). No? (Asking me). (Expression of relief)’...’(Berlin, August 2011)

As it will become obvious in Chapter 7, however, the lack of familiarity with academic terminology is not always a burden. In reality, it becomes a motivation for some activists to pursue their studies in the field.

#### 6.4.2 Composition of the organization committees and participants

The whole idea of transnationalizing queer festivals is reflected in the composition of both the organizing committees and the attendees. The international composition of the organization committees and of the festivals’ participants reveal the steady progress of Europeanization in European capital cities. It is in these urban centres that many non-nationals participating in the organizing committees live, work and study. Regarding participants, they tend to come from neighbouring countries. Proximity in this sense is very important for attendance at the events.

Queer festivals are organized horizontally, in that their organization committees are informally connected through consensus-based deliberation. These organizing committees deal with the setting up of the festivals. Although some of their membership is stable, open calls for new members to join take place a few months before the festivals, as illustrated by the callout of the Oslo queer festival 2013: “Do you want to participate in making this year festival? We have to decide where we want the festival to take place this year! Come and help us decide<sup>97</sup>”. Similarly, on January 12, 2013, the Queeristan festival in Amsterdam published a call: “We’re starting to organise again for 2013! Meetings every Sunday at the Latin American Center at 17h. If you’re interested in

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<sup>97</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/events/600682553278989/>

organising with us come to our meeting tomorrow”.<sup>98</sup> Festivals display these calls through social media (Facebook, mailing lists etc.)

The transnational composition of the organizing committees constitutes a basic aspect of the anti-identitarian identity-work, to the extent that it sets the basis for the creation of internationalist collective identities, which extend beyond national borders. The groups organizing the festivals are very keen to create a core with members from diverse backgrounds: national, gender, and sexual. Similarly, the diversity of participants’ national backgrounds is also part of the story. In fact, many people cross these different borders in order to attend queer events. The reasons for attending vary, from a feeling of belonging to an imaginary transnational queer community, to affective reasons, such as intimate relationships or friendships. A combination of motivations is also very common. As Tobin, a member of the Queeristan festival, emphasized:

‘Many of them [the old organizational members] are still in the circles; they’re still in the network. But like I said, the group is mostly international, so many people do not have Dutch citizenship, most of them students, so they’re here for a semester or for two semesters. Or many people leave again. But there is such a commitment that people are still part of the network...This year one of the participants of last year’s organization flew over from the USA to give workshops.’ [Amsterdam, May 2012]

The international character of the organization committees is subject to variations according to the context in which they act. The Amsterdam organizing committee for instance is very international, whereas in Oslo, three-quarters are Norwegians and in Rome, all the members are Italian.

Diversity in national origins is much more visible among the participants in the events. The pattern is clearly shaped by geographical proximity. Thus, residents from neighbouring countries are more numerous than those living further away, making proximity a ‘critical factor’ (this can be seen in Ayoub’s work on Polish sexual minorities

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<sup>98</sup>[http://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=156441577807398&story\\_fbid=315900648528156](http://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=156441577807398&story_fbid=315900648528156)

mobilizing in Berlin (2012: 13)). For instance, several people from Berlin attended the Copenhagen queer festival<sup>99</sup>, while many Scandinavians and British are regular visitors.

In sum, although queer festivals are locally based in big capital cities, they set out, as a strategic objective, to attract people from other countries. This is achieved both at the level of the organization committee but also at the level of participants. The degree of achievement is quite high, even in isolated cities, such as Oslo. Geographical proximity plays a crucial role for attending the event. Through the international character of the composition of the festival, the events create the fundament for the emergence of transnational counterpublics. This is furthered by the links that activists have with other European social movements and political cultures.

#### 6.4.3 Activist networks: links with other European leftist scenes

*Queeristan Festival, Amsterdam, 31 May 2013*

*Workshop: House of Brag*

*Time: Saturday June 1st 17:00-19:00*

*Location: Op De Valreep*

*See Full Programme Schedule*

*House of Brag is a collective of radical queers and allies from London, UK.*

*Our main project is The London Queer Social Centre. We take over empty buildings around South London to create safe, fun, creative, non-commercial social spaces for queers and activists and friends. We've run two temporary social centres so far and the third will be happening this June & July. Our workshop will take the form of a discussion and skill-share, where we share our experiences of running squatted*

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<sup>99</sup> The distance between Berlin and Copenhagen is only 356 km.



*queer social centres and ask our audience for their experiences, suggestions, and advice.*<sup>100</sup>

Transnational links between the festivals allow queer activists to shape a sort of activist map, in which circulation of ideas and skill-sharing become possible. This kind of mapping is not new for progressive social movements, or for the European Left in general. Social movements on the left, as well as institutional actors, such as political parties, have always connected through networks which allowed the creation of transnational channels of communication. In Western Europe, in particular, actors on the left coordinated and exchanged information and resources and built common identities after WWII, and the division of the continent into two blocks. Despite any local differences, European identities of the left circulated very actively in this space, building similar political categories. One clear example of how this division of political identities operated across borders can be seen, for instance, in the split of the communist parties into Stalinists/pro-USSR and euro-communists/anti-Stalinists groups, and this split has left its mark on Europe (Mude and March, 2005). The contemporary identity of antifa (antifascist) (Doidge, 2013: 258) and the digital network *Europeans against the political system* are further manifestations of the European trend to make cross-border political identifications attainable through networks.

Personal links are a crucial factor in the maintenance and strengthening of queer networks. In a similar way to what Ayoub refers to as ‘tactics of European socialization’ (2012: 25), queers exploit the available networking resources across Europe in order to transnationalize their festivals as much as possible. By capitalizing on these networks, organizing committees are able to invite and give space to crews from other festivals. A good example of this is the participation by the Amsterdam-based Queeristan group in Rome in April 2013. The personal links between one of the organizers of the Rome festival with the Queeristan group, made when he was studying in Amsterdam, created these ties, which brought the two groups together. The Queeristan crew, composed of

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<sup>100</sup> <http://queeristan.org/2013/05/21/workshop-house-of-brag/>

eight activists from Amsterdam, gave a speech during one of the workshops entitled 'Bridging the gap: Beyond the dichotomy theory/practice'. For this workshop, the organizers had also invited 'Pink Panthers', a Portuguese queer organization, Athens Pride from Greece, and Rachele Borghi, an Italian academic and performer, who was living in Rennes, France at the time. The organizers' objective was to share experiences from queer politics, especially those in Southern Europe, but also, as Andrea Gilbert, from Athens Pride, pointed out: 'to create a political network for the future'.

Similarly, during the Queeristan festival in Amsterdam in 2013, members from the 'House of Brag', a newly founded queer squat in London, organized a workshop. Their objective was to 'skill-share where we share our experiences of running squatted queer social centres and ask our audience for their experiences, suggestions, and advice.'<sup>101</sup> The workshop was lively, and participants shared their experiences regarding squatting. This networking between House of Brag and Queeristan led to collaboration. As Vinci, one member of the Queeristan organizing committee confirmed:

'We now had two workshops at least on different ways of organizing with the House of Brag. From London. So we want to do something and talk about how to organize different ways of living, sort of living on the edge, and still making the world better, or at least the movement, the scene better.' [Amsterdam, June 2013]

The idea of political links across borders resonates with the discourses of the festivals. For instance, the Copenhagen festival's main slogan 'Do it yourself, do it together' is linked to one of the principal characteristics of the leftist extra-parliamentary scenes of Europe, especially those connected to the anarchist scenes. As Leach and Haunss remind us in their study on the Autonomous Movement in Germany, the politics of these scenes are based on 'a rejection of representative politics of any stripe...they reject the structural hierarchy and ideological dogmatism' (2009: 262). Similarly, when describing DIY feminism in the European alterglobalization movement, Saskia Poldervaart explains that 'Do It Yourself' stands for each individual designing her own life and taking initiatives, without expecting political or social institutions to do so (2006: 8) The advertising of the

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<sup>101</sup> <http://queeristan.org/category/queeristan-2013/page/3/>

festival is similar to the ways by which events of the scene are made public: street posters constitute the main source of information about the event for the inhabitants of the city, as usually happens with other leftist events<sup>102</sup>.

Furthermore, interviews with queer activists attest that queer festivals function as spaces in which activists build different political subjectivities. Many of these actors construct their political awareness through participation in various movements of different countries. Their life histories tend to reveal their attraction to transnational political trajectories, mainly within political groups of the left, and within different anarchist and leftist scenes around Europe. The interviews demonstrate that actors participating in the festivals establish political relationships in one place, and hold them when travelling or moving to another country (Passerini et al, 2007: 3). Since many of these activists have lived in places other than where the festival takes place, they tend to keep affiliations with political groups from countries they have lived in. Participating in the festival is however a way to enrich older political identities through contact with other actors.

Activists and participants can hold several political identities and membership in different places across Europe and beyond. Many come from (or support) a varied far-leftist ideology (anarchism, anti-authoritarianism, anti-fascism, leftist libertarianism), while others feel more connected to the traditional left (environmentalism, social-democracy). This was confirmed by the survey among the participants in the Oslo queer festival. In the question 'From 0 to 10 how do you define your political positioning?', 28% replied with 0, that is extreme-left, 24% with 1, and 28% with 2. These results are indicative of the trend of self-identification with the most radical streams of the left. Moreover, apart from their political views, many activists feel connected to radical sub-cultures, such as punk, gay leather, and drag queen scenes, as is revealed through the interviews.

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<sup>102</sup> As in the case of Berlin, 'to find out what is "really" going on..., one does not read the newspapers, one reads the streets' (Leach and Haunss, 2009: 263)

Robin, a member of the Queeristan festival in Amsterdam and an active member of the Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions movement [BDS], the main objective of which is to fight against 'Israeli apartheid', as he calls it, said:

'In the Netherlands I gave different workshops in different venues, anarchist venues, or just specific events for Palestinian issues. I give talks, mainly about the Palestinian situation, under Israeli occupation. So, I am very active on that. I am always invited to give talks... But now with the queer issue, this is very new, and this is where I find myself more and this is where I want to take it more and that's why I want to support it with more education so that I can take it further.' [Copenhagen, July 2011]

For Robin, his queer struggle in Amsterdam cannot be separated from his links with his home nation, Palestine; he is both queer and Palestinian. He describes his intersectional identity very illustratively in his interview:

'The queer is part of my personality. But it is very well connected, very much connected to the occupation. So that's how it's different [from the other Dutch queer activists]. In the Netherlands, the queer...and being an international movement, not specifically about the Netherlands, but having more international activists brings it to more global perspective. Palestinian queer is a very specific, about Palestinian background. So you talk about specific things, in that group. You mainly have the campaign for BDS to stop the occupation. So you have a political agenda. And you are also bringing the queers out in Palestine, bringing them to be part of the society to be there and to be respected. Because the queers are there, calling for a cause that is important to every Palestinian. And it's good that the members of the queer group are very well educated and, as the majority of the Palestinians, and they're working hard, and that's really achieving good results so far'. (Copenhagen, July 2011)

Sergio, a Turkish PhD student in Amsterdam, switches between several activist identities. He does however enthusiastically embrace a queer identity. During his interview, he shifts the attention to his political affiliations with the radical environmentalist and

climate change movements. Tracking back in time, he sees the climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009, as the landmark of his political awareness, which changed his mind on radical politics:

‘I meet these wonderful people, climate justice action, basically autonomists from all over Europe, who were attracted to this call to Copenhagen. And this was my real contact with autonomia<sup>103</sup>, without really knowing what it is, again you know, being 5 years in France, and you just don’t realize what’s happening out.’ (Amsterdam, May 2012)

Zoe repeatedly links her queer political identity with other radical subcultures in various parts of Europe during her life narration. At the time of the interview, she was both an organizing member of the 2011 Copenhagen queer festival, and a singer in a Polish anarcho-punk group:

‘I go back and forth for the band, and we have some rehearsals and tours. I don’t know how it’s going to work now, because now I decided that I wanted to stay in Copenhagen. At least for 2 more years. I will see how it’ll work. I don’t know, we didn’t want to split, but maybe we’ll have a pause or something like this.’ (Copenhagen, July 2011)

Zoe moved to Copenhagen in February 2011, attracted by: ‘The anarchist movement [...] and the punk scene. That’s why I was very excited about living in Copenhagen.’ The historical scenes of the left in specific Western European cities function as sites of attraction for activists who claim to be unable to feel at home at their own places of origin. As Zoe says, in her explanation of the differences between Warsaw and Copenhagen’s activist scenes:

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<sup>103</sup> Autonomia is a branch of a far-left extra-parliamentary movement based on theories of Italian workerism and theories of Toni Negri

‘The DIY thing is like priority for me, always. But I can see that it’s working a lot better here [In Copenhagen] that I really feel a part of a collective, as a group. And not a leader with all the responsibilities on my head anymore... I really like this kind of very deep reflexivity about politics...that we are so sensitive, and so self-critique, and so open to all these kind of discussion. I’ve never been to a surrounding that is so open to discuss, and reflect, on things...I was very surprised that we’ve discussed such issues, and in such a matter’<sup>104</sup>. (Copenhagen, July 2011)

Once again, the image of Amsterdam as a city that offers the space and the people with whom radical activism can be practised, lay behind Sergio’s decision to move there:

‘And it was also going to squats here in Amsterdam for the first time. That kind of stuff. And again, they were meeting in Amsterdam, ‘cause there were squats that they could organize this, ‘cause there was a good contingency of people here [laughter].’ (Amsterdam, July 2011)

Although political trajectories across borders and the construction of similar political subjectivities is part of how a queer festival becomes a transnational arena, there is another factor which should not be neglected in such an analysis. We should also see socialization, affective relationships and contingent reasons as significant motivations for people who keep their political affiliations both with their places of origin and with new places of arrival. Sergio, living now in Amsterdam, includes the socialization factor in his description of the relationships he had with some friends, who made them also when moving to the city:

‘My best shot would be to be in the belly of the beast...I came to Amsterdam to look for schools at the same time CJA [Climate Justice Action] had its first post-Copenhagen summit here. *Basically because my best friend was studying here.* So, I squatted his place for 1 month. But also, yes, the country of liberties etc. It was

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<sup>104</sup> She makes reference to the political discussions which occurred within the Copenhagen festival (July 2011)

attractive. And more important, I wanted to do my research in English. That's why I left France at the first place. I didn't want to do it in French. England, anyway, was out of question; expensive, *politically not inspiring* etc. and Netherlands was also attractive about design and culture. So, about for a year after Strasbourg spending a little time in Turkey, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, going back and forth to many places. Going to Strasbourg again for a NATO summit. Again, it was *fast tracking of radicalization*, which brought me here' (in Amsterdam; May 2012)

Zoe moved to Copenhagen when she got a scholarship to study. She joined her friend with whom she used to be active together in a queer feminist group in Warsaw. They decided to engage with the Copenhagen queer festival together:

'One or two weeks after I moved. And we just went to Ana's apartment, without knowing anyone, and we just said hey, Can you speak English? We are from Poland, we'd like to do the queer festival with you. And they started to speak English.'  
(Copenhagen, July 2011)

Queer actors hold usually multiple political identities, one of the results of their prior participation in different social movements of the left across Europe. Moreover, their personal trajectories show that these multiple belongings across various national settings have shaped their political subjectivities. These transnational multiple belongings are very important for queer festivals. In their function as transnational counterpublic arenas, activists bring in their own political stories and experiences, influencing each other through these interactions.

#### 6.4.4 Digital communicative practices

None of the organizations behind the queer festivals has a formal structure. They are rather collectives with an international composition of activists. Queer festivals tend to involve decentralized network formations supported by technological means of

communication, such as mailing lists and social networks. The festivals function as arenas ‘where transnational publics can emerge’ (Juris, 2008: 203), supported by digital communication tools:

‘[Queeristan] has a very big international network. I know people here and there, someone else knows people here and there. So, we gather that. And we disseminate the announcement and then we have very standard [public relations] propaganda committee.’ (Tobin, Amsterdam, May 2012)

Apart from mobilizing human, material and symbolic resources, queer arenas produce self-organized transnational communication. As Juris says, the ‘exchange regarding tactics, strategies, protests, and campaigns’ (2008: 203) is part of this transnational communication, which -in the case of queer festivals- shapes the emergence of these queer transnational counterpublics.

E-mail lists, websites, and Facebook pages provide space for discussions on the organization and the politics of the movement. One example of these can be found in the e-mail list *queerandnow*, which serves as a means to spread information. Older mailing lists, such as that of *Queeruption* contributed to the publicity for the majority of queer events before 2010. Digital platforms help the organization and communication of queer activists across the continent and beyond.

The digital tools used by the festival of Copenhagen and the Queeristan festival illustrate how transnational digital communication operates. The main website for Copenhagen’s festival <http://www.queerfestival.org/> provides a recent archive with photos (since 2010). At the same time, it provides useful information about present and future events, as well as all the ways in which new activists could engage. Finally, it constitutes the basic ideological platform of the event, since it displays the festival’s manifesto and other policies of the organization, for example on drugs and safe spaces. The information is given in four languages: English, Danish, German and Spanish. An additional website has been set up on the music platform MySpace, which describes the festival’s cultural



events<sup>105</sup>. It is here that the counter-character of the queer arena is shaped, by means of DIY songs. These songs have titles with sexually explicit vocabulary ('How clean is your penis'), celebrations of the non-normative body ('Big size girl') and the trash aesthetics<sup>106</sup> promoted within the festivals ('Tina Träsch'). A Facebook page also supports the digital infrastructure of the event.

The Queeristan festival has also a very active digital toolkit, manifested through its webpage<sup>107</sup> and its Facebook page.<sup>108</sup> Similarly to Copenhagen's webpage, Queeristan keeps a digital archive of the last three years of its existence, displaying in systematic order manifestos, photos and workshop calls. It is also used as a platform to disseminate information for forthcoming events. Its Facebook page constitutes a crucial means to disseminate information and to diffuse calls for volunteering, participation, and forthcoming benefit dinners, parties and other similar activities. Issues of collective identity are debated on both webpages. The topic of the name of the festival and its supposedly oriental character (-istan) provoked intense discussion on the Facebook page. The organizers decided to publish a whole text on the idea of the name, displayed on both pages.

Beyond its use in spreading information, digital transnational communication fosters the growth of emotional ties generated during the festivals. As Queeristan's organizer, Tobin, said: 'Over the e-mail correspondence we have still people from previous years, giving their thoughts. (Amsterdam, 2012). Emotional ties between activists help sustain their digital communication.

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<sup>105</sup> <http://www.myspace.com/copenhagenqueerfestival>

<sup>106</sup> This trend of 'trash aesthetics' is part of a broader process of clothes styling within youth subcultures, facilitated by commerce, such as vintage shops, from where many activists get these clothes. This process started in the early 60s, when post-hippies, punks, students and others drawn to the subculture obtained a cheaper but more expansive wardrobe. Vintage shops provide old-fashioned, trash-like clothes of high quality and at relatively low prices. This vintage style depends on the 'surplus of goods whose use value is not expended when their first owners no longer want them' (McRobbie, 1997: 193).

<sup>107</sup> <http://queeristan.org/>

<sup>108</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Queeristan/156441577807398?fref=ts>

Digital communicative practices are the basis on which queer festivals are constructed as transnational arenas. Digital communication is a cross-border tool par excellence. Queer festivals use digital tools as platforms to disseminate information and to maintain their publics. Furthermore, festivals' webpages and Facebook pages help spread the information, and make links between different connected actors and political communities. This supposed openness, enhanced by the impersonal character of digital communication tools, gives the possibility for actors in different countries to get in touch with each festival's network, and organize an embodied presence in the forthcoming event.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have argued that queer festivals function as arenas constituted by a series of cross-border practices, thus creating transnational counterpublics. These arenas are built beyond institutional fields, and beyond the national official public spheres in which they take place. A set of practices is thus activated in order to build these arenas. Language, international composition, links with other social movements across borders, and digital communication all make up a set of cross-border practices. Contrary to institutional approaches of the public sphere, I demonstrated how queer festivals attempt to build their own transnational arenas through the activation of a series of specific cross-border practices at the physical and digital levels. It is the accumulation of all these practices that builds queer counterpublics as transnational counterpublics (Olesen, 2005)

To address these issues, I attempted an exploration of physical and non-physical cross-border practices. Transnationalism is produced by queer activists through their practices, which span national borders. In this sense, the arenas they create are not used as a strategic frame to enhance institutional visibility and obtain additional resources. The arenas are rather performatively created through cross-border movements, and have as objective to build their own spaces in which they attempt to celebrate their critiques on types of identities. Therefore, queer festivals do not explicitly address issues of

transnationalism at the discursive level. The transnational character of the arenas they aspire to create is, rather, manifested through the series of cross-border practices they activate and promote. The transnational character of queer festivals thus is the result of the activation of this series of specific mechanisms; in other words, the transnational character of a queer festival is always *under construction*. (Juris, 2008: 210).

I categorized and analysed four sets of practices, which offer the possibility to queer festivals to build their arenas and thus build their transnational counterpublics. I focused on issues of language, the international composition of the organization committees and their public, cross-border links with other social movements and transnational subjectivities, and finally digital communication. Each of these categories was analysed through references to the fieldwork. I used all those patterns which manifest the activation on the part of the organization committees, but also those from the publics that participate in the festivals.

The transnational character of queer festivals can become the departure point from which to re-examine both definitions of transnational social movements, and the political space queer festivals open towards transnational public spheres (Fraser, 2007). By fostering transnationalism, queer festivals offer the possibility for ‘transnational counterpublics’ to emerge. Transnational counterpublics are not closed, and so never totally disconnected from transnational public spheres (Olesen, 2005: 424). Their characteristic lies rather in their critical stance against public spheres.

An additional feature of queer festivals as transnational counterpublics is that they embrace an anti-identitarian ethos, upon which they attempt to build their collective identity. Following this line of thought, the transnational character of queer festivals connects with a significant ideological frame for queer politics: the idea of borders. The move beyond borders, either sexual/gender or any other type, constitutes a basic component of queer ideology. Therefore, its implementation in practical terms, the setting-up of mechanisms which would allow festivals to become transnational arenas,

aligns with the normative idea for the movement, which sets as aim to move beyond fixed identities. Beyond cross-border practices, further sets of mechanisms need to be promoted and implemented in order for queer festivals to create their own counterpublics. These counterpublics embrace an anti-identitarian ethos, which implies a specific identity-work to be diffused. The identity-work takes place through the performance of a set of internal practices manifested also in cultural practices, as will become obvious in the following chapter.

## Chapter 7

### **‘Not yet queer enough’: Constructing identity by addressing culture<sup>109</sup>**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

Queer discourse is based upon a belief in the rejection of sexual and gender identities. This rejection of identities, however, generates an identity of its own, creating the so-called ‘queer paradox’ (Gamson, 1995). Thus, queer politics has contributed to the establishment of a new identitarian paradigm: anti-identitarian collective identity: a belief that it is essential to ‘resist any collective label that could be put on a banner’ (Jasper and McGarry, forthcoming). In this sense, language and the discursive construction of identities is particularly stressed in anti-identitarian models: ‘By deconstructing the political and cultural processes that create identities, this work emphasizes the fictional nature of our language and labels for all groups’ (Jasper and McGarry, forthcoming).

A consideration of the discursive part of the collective identity work of queer festivals shows, however, only one side of the picture. Texts and discourses circulating are not sufficient sources from which to understand the whole process of the construction of festivals’ collective identity. Prefigurative movements tend to promote specific oppositional lifestyles, through cultural codes and practices. Applying the same principle to queer festivals, we could say that strong cultural codes need to be promoted for the solidification of its oppositional character. Queer discourse is rather fragile for a social movement, to the extent that it has no means of addressing concrete claims, through rational channels, to the state. Its strength relies rather on its attempt to challenge dominant representations of gender and sexuality at the cultural level. Thus, the identity work should shift our attention to how specific practices contribute to the promotion of an

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<sup>109</sup> The title is inspired by Stephen Vallochi’s article ‘Not yet queer enough: The lessons of queer theory for the sociology of gender and sexuality’ (2005).

ethos which opposes established cultural codes and goes hand in hand with the anti-identitarian identity upon which it is based.

Cultural practices connect to the idea that is being developed throughout the thesis: queer festivals function as arenas which construct counterpublics. For these counterpublics, 'embodied sociability' is very important; in other words, counterpublics are not always organized by 'the hierarchy of faculties that elevates rational-critical reflection as the self-image of humanity', and they might depend more on 'performance spaces than on print' (Warner, 2002: 89). This means that the conflicts queer festivals address are not limited to those of ideas or questions or policy. The festivals challenge speech genres and modes of address whose constitutive discourse, outside of queer arenas, would be regarded 'with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness' (Warner, 2002: 86). Queer festivals thus challenge established modes of address, moving beyond the rational-critical debate of texts.

Therefore, the promotion of such cultural practices is extremely important for queer festivals. Like any other prefigurative movement, however, this promotion is charged with normative assumptions (Samuel, 2013). Queer counterpublics should not be idealized. In their attempt to solidify their collective identity, queer festivals are mediated through boundaries, which construct not only the 'who belongs' (external), but also, 'to which extent one belongs' (internal). These boundaries are negotiated continuously and operate through all the ritualized components of the festivals: debates, workshops, assemblies, performances, and informal conversations. Contrary to the Birmingham School's idea that 'subordinate groups [...] actively transpose cultural signs across different social contexts, in this manner subverting their dominant, socially prescribed meanings thus providing them with alternative layers of significance' (Lizardo and Skiles, 2008: 495), the internal battles of meaning which take place inside the festivals move beyond the idea of queer groups as subcultures, and bring us closer to the view of queer festivals as counterpublics: These are publics with an agency of social

transformation, using corporeal expressivity as well as rationalist dialogue (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002), and which do not attempt to hide their internal contradictions.

I will start by making a brief overview of the debates over cultural capital, habitus and subcultures as they are mainly debated within cultural sociology. These debates will be crucial for the understanding of the empirical findings which will be analysed later. I then proceed to the systematic analysis of cultural codes, and to a cartography of which festivals promote these cultural styles, and how they do this. Among the questions I will face in this chapter, the following are relevant: To what extent actors follow the cultural practices promoted by the festivals, and under which circumstances; how the promotion of specific cultural modes is channeled by the festivals; and how these practices relate to the queer anti-identity narrative. In order to answer these questions, I will focus on aspects of language, food, and clothing, as evidence of cultural practices with charged political significations. Based upon participant observation, and through interviewees' accounts, I will demonstrate that these three cultural practices, modes of addressing the *political* and challenging *cultural spheres*, become very visible within the queer festivals and form the cultural superstructure of the arenas, molding their collective identity. The language aspect, in particular, will be scrutinized through the focus group I organized during the Oslo queer festival in 2011. The focus group will reveal the existing links between queer academic discourses and queer political practices, and the role of the former in the identity work of the latter.

## **7.2 Theoretical Overview**

This chapter departs from main ideas of Bourdieusian sociology on cultural capital and habitus, and engages with Munoz's idea of 'disidentification'. Habitus, according to Bourdieu, is 'a system of durable and transposable dispositions (schemes of perception, appreciation and action), produced by particular social environments, which function as the principle of the generation and structuring of practices and representation' (Bourdieu, 1990b: 53). It functions in ways which can sometimes be contradictory, depending on the

opposing formations that produced it<sup>110</sup>, while it allows a person ‘to develop embodied ease in navigating cultural and practical action in structured ways’ (Schilt and Windsor, 2014: 734). This ease in navigating specific fields is the result of the militant history of each participant, their ‘militant habitus’, defined as ‘political practices of the militants through a system of durable and transposable systems’ (Yon, 2005: 142-translation mine). Militant habitus defines one’s position within the collective practices of the festival. Different habitus thus operate within a specific ‘field of cultural production’ (Bourdieu, 1983), and are inextricably linked with the cultural capital of their holders. Borrowing Frith’s words on popular culture consumption:

‘A similar use of accumulated knowledge and discriminatory skill is apparent in low cultural forms, and has the same hierarchical effect. Low culture, that is to say, generates its own capital...which [is] organized around exclusiveness, but equally significant for the fans’. (1998: 9)

In contrast to the subculture logic of homogenous oppositional entities against dominant cultures, the Bourdieusian cultural capital paradigm allows for the examination of cultural hierarchy as a ‘useful conceptual lens with which to understand the dynamics of symbolic appropriation of popular culture’ (Lizardo and Skiles, 2008: 497). This view will allow us to deconstruct the idea of queer festivals as ‘egalitarian safe havens from hierarchy and power’ and rather acknowledge them as scenes ‘structured around multidimensional axes of differentiation and distinction’ (ibid).

Activists and participants in the festivals, however, develop strategies to resist these hierarchical effects of cleavages in capital. Jose Munoz theorizes one of those strategies most beautifully. He talks about *disidentification* as a tool to describe:

‘The survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of

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<sup>110</sup> ‘[...] l’existence d’habitus clivés, déchirés, portant sous la forme de tensions et de contradictions la trace des conditions de formation contradictoires dont ils sont le produit’ (Bourdieu, 1997: 79)



subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.’ (Munoz, 1999: 4)

Disidentification allows for a theorization of activists as subjects who find political agency through events, like queer festivals, by negotiating their identification, according to their own habitus<sup>111</sup>. The degree of identification with the cultural codes promoted within the spaces varies. This negotiation is certainly not assimilationist, to the extent that subjects do not look for integration to the normative public sphere. On the other hand, neither do the majority of activists adopt radical counter-identifications, totally marginalized from the official public sphere. The main reason for this is that most of them enjoy high social and educational positions.

Habitus, cultural capital and disidentification will be mobilized throughout the chapter to describe the ways queer festivals build their collective identity, by introducing and promoting specific cultural practices. I see these practices as suggesting new ways of living, new ways of developing sociability. Therefore, their function as modes of address, which help solidify an anti-identitarian ethos, is of particular interest for further analysis.

*Cultural styles carry charged political significations, by relating to existing counter-cultural fields, and they do not mediate only through rational-critical argumentation.* They generate narratives on what queer identity should be, and what its anti-identitarian embodiment should look like. Through an analysis of this process of degrees of belonging, I will demonstrate that, in the dynamics involved in building a collective identity, queer festivals come to face challenges concerning class and racial diversity. This acknowledged lack of diversity leads unavoidably to the building of counterpublics as arenas with specific racial and class positions.

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<sup>111</sup> See also Kaminiski and Taylor (2008: 63): ‘Disidentification is a strategy of transforming culture from within by taking dominant cultural symbols and working against them to critique hegemonic rules and identities and create new identities

### 7.3 Speaking ‘queer’

*Queeristan festival 2013, Amsterdam, 3<sup>rd</sup> day.*

*I am going to follow a very interesting workshop. Susan Stryker is invited. I googled her that morning on Internet. Stryker is the director of the Institute for LGBT studies at the University of Arizona. Her workshop is called ‘Interrelations of archival research, filmmaking, theorizing, and activism’. I am talking with a guy who knew her. He explains to me that Stryker is a famous historian and transgender theorist in queer academic circles. According to him, Stryker is the landmark of the festival. There are two other workshops taking place at the same time. I decided to move from the one to the other. Stryker’s workshop was a success in terms of numbers of attendees. Around thirty people went to listen to her.*

*[...]*

*She speaks passionately about her documentary film Screening Queens: The riot at Compton’s cafeteria. I look around to see the faces of the participants. All of them look very concentrated on her analyses. She talks about archives, documentaries and activism. ‘What makes Stryker’s presence at the queer festival so important?’, and ‘what does this invitation from the organization team signify for the links between queer activism and academia?’, I wonder.<sup>112</sup>*

Language is a basic component of queer politics. In Chapter 3, I demonstrated how the whole ideology of the queer movement is based upon the academic discourses of queer theory<sup>113</sup>. Queer theory developed within the English literature departments of prestigious American Universities. Drawing from French post-structuralist philosophies of language, queer theory came to identify the binary systems upon which our language is built. Thus, binary couples, such as man/woman and gay/straight play a powerful role in shaping the construction of language. Social approaches on queer theory came to extend this argument, by demonstrating how these binaries also shape social organization, through systems of heteronormativity and heterosexism (Seidman, 1996).

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<sup>112</sup> Field notes, Amsterdam 2013

<sup>113</sup> I examine here only queer jargon. Multi-lingualism and the use of English as communication tools are studied in Chapter 5.

The jargon of queer theory is widely spread within queer festivals. Introduced by people with masters or doctoral degrees in gender studies, cultural studies and similar disciplines, *queer vocabulary* is displayed and promoted through the official discourses of the festivals, but also during the everyday interactions between activists and participants. By *queer vocabulary*, I mean a linguistic terminology linked to the existing theoretical debates of queer studies programmes. If we see the use of queer vocabulary as an autonomous way to address political issues, then it becomes obvious that queer vocabulary constitutes a distinct speech style addressing the political.

I found that *queer vocabulary* holds its authority precisely because it is based on academic theories. Participants however who do not feel familiar with it, mainly because they do not possess the appropriate educational tools, express a desire to explore and broaden their theoretical horizons, since it seems that queer theory can function as a liberating discourse against gender and sexual oppression. This is one of the major findings of the focus group I organized at the Oslo queer festival in 2011.

### 7.3.1 Queer festivals and academic discourse: A Focus Group Analysis

‘Queer activism and Academia’ was a focus group I organized during the Oslo queer festival on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2011.<sup>114</sup> Gender representation was equally distributed (6 men, 6 women), while the national origins of the participants varied. Based on my assumptions on the strong links between queer theory and queer activism, I had a triple ‘agenda-setting’:

- (1) Terminology. The words we are using. Some people use sophisticated words familiar to academia, others do not understand what they mean
- (2) Queer politics and Gender studies. The educational background: how many queer activists had university education, how many of those had studied gender studies.

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<sup>114</sup> I would like to thank Helge Hiram Jensen who kept copious notes of the workshop, for two hours without interruption!

(3) Legitimacy. To what extent university scholars are legitimate in talking about queer activism without being part of it.<sup>115</sup>

(1) **Terminology**: People shared their experiences relating to the use of words. One person admitted having come across specific words he did not know. Examples of such words were: *homonormativity* and *cis*:

Giacomo<sup>116</sup>: ‘Last week I came across a new term: ‘*homonormativity*’<sup>117</sup>; it is a neologism. Refers to a certain development in LGBT community allowing only for couples of pretty young boys not making too much noise, lesbians should be pretty, not look butch - so that the style fits well with accepted standards. Alternatively one may try to include all of LGBT.’

Giacomo’s experience was the departure point of the conversation, which opened the discussion on language. People started describing how difficult is for some participants in the festival to speak or follow a quick conversation in English. As an Australian female participant put it: ‘as an English speaker, I see that some are uncomfortable with that’ (Kate).<sup>118</sup>

For understanding of both queer terminology and English, the solution suggested was that

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<sup>115</sup> Field Notes, Oslo, September 2011

<sup>116</sup> Names are changed

<sup>117</sup> Homonormativity is a relatively recent term, used mainly in gender studies, in order to describe the assimilation of heteronormative ideals into gay culture and by individuals. It was first used in theoretical discussion in the book by Lisa Duggan ‘*The twilight of equality? Neoliberalism, cultural politics and the attack on democracy*’ (2004). Homonormativity is mainly linked to assimilation of the gay community into the neoliberal market, as well as the assimilation of their lifestyles, which tend to look like traditional middle-class heterosexual ones (marriage, children, high incomes etc.).

<sup>118</sup> See Chapter 5 on transnational practices. English is the de facto official language of all the festivals I have attended. English language constitutes one of the main constituents of the transnationalization process of queer festivals in Europe. To give some brief examples, the calls for participation are written in English and in the language of the country where the festivals take place. In addition, until recently, they were diffused through the *Queeruption* mailing list, which was, mainly, an English-speaking channel of communication. During the festivals, the flyers, the programmes, the posters, the rules, the prices of the drinks, everything follows the same rule. Everything is, more or less, written in English, and sometimes in the national language. Finally, every activity, such as the daily plenaries and the presentations of the workshops usually take place in English.

participants should not be afraid to ask. As a girl put it: 'To avoid the problem it may be good if people are not afraid to ask'.

(2) **Queer politics and Gender studies:** The second part of the discussion was dedicated to the relations between queer politics and gender studies. My objective was to trace the relationship between queer terminology as it is used within the spaces of the festivals, and the influence of gender studies jargon, as it is introduced by people who have followed relevant university studies. The discussion on this topic was the liveliest. Participants in the focus group engaged actively, expressing their opinions with examples from their personal stories. They seemed aware of the links between queer theory and queer politics. Although I was expecting participants to be overwhelmed and slightly skeptical about queer theories, surprisingly, the majority of the opinions concentrated around the need for more theoretical discourses to circulate within the spaces.

The basic frames I traced in this discussion were the following:

(a) *Queer festivals need more theory.* The majority of the participants consider that academics should occupy a larger space within the festival, and diffuse their academic knowledge inside the activist spaces.

As one female performer put it:

Nicky: 'For me, I would have liked something more educational. I studied gender studies six years ago, then queer theory was new, and we didn't have much of it. It could be good to be up-to-date on how the theory is developing through time.'

Giacomo contrasted the amount of sex information available in the workshops, compared to the lack of elaborated theoretical discussions:

Giacomo: 'The info material we get is focused on sex, I have seen hundreds of books telling me how to put on condoms but I have not seen info material on gender

studies. Maybe we should suggest that academics make small booklets'

People with no background in gender studies expressed their desire to receive more information on the topic. Kaja, one of the main organizers of the festival said:

Kaja: 'I think those doing the festival have less connection to the theory. Not all needing only an update, as I didn't study gender studies ever'.

Kaja actually implied that she needed more than an update. She was longing for a solid introduction in gender studies. She thus came up with the idea of a future introductory course in queer theory:

Kaja: 'Yes, it would be good with introduction. You study how people understand words. We could have more of this kind.'

Many participants acknowledged however a degree of familiarity with main queer concepts. They acknowledged some names or book titles, such as the book-landmark of queer studies 'Gender Trouble' by Judith Butler (1990)<sup>119</sup>. Jan, a freelance scholar from Finland, suggested:

Jan: 'With difficult writers, such as Butler, interviews are often easier to understand, in oral language. Butler seemed to make sense there [in a documentary]. Bringing such things to festival would be good idea.'

Kate, Australian, who teaches English in Zagreb, admitted not having read 'Gender Trouble', but to feeling as if she should do so. In answer to the question as to why she 'should', she replied:

Kate: 'Because everyone refers to it as something you should have read'.

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<sup>119</sup> Butler Judith (1990) *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, New York, Routledge

*(b) Academia has to listen to queer activism too.* The second frame, embraced by fewer people, was channeled as a desire for ‘queerization’ of academia. While participants did not deny the need for activist spaces to be open to academic discourses, some of them, especially those coming from universities, expressed the need for academics to listen to activists as well. As one participant put it:

Weronika: ‘I come from academia, which feels all-consuming. I come here to get out. There is so little room for activism in academia; you have to do that outside. They want you to be neutral, so they are skeptical to activism’

Jan, the freelance scholar, urged academics to learn more from contemporary politics:

Jan: ‘Now is the time when activism could contribute to academia. We have been chewing Gender Trouble for 20 years. What should we do now? Queer theory started with impulse from activism, and a renewal from that seems to be what academia wants. Maybe the two will not go so different ways for the next 20 years’

For other activists, the links between politics and academia are much more nuanced. The following conversation is relevant:

Jan: You don't need to have one or the other, activist or academic event. I will now go to a conference with an activist event, and the individual can choose to participate in both or one

Paola: Yes, you can be both activist and academic. In Gothenburg we had this.

Jeroen: For some academics queer studies is queer activism

Kate: I think in academia, activism is not of the loud type. As a teacher I can do activism in my class, by having gender-neutral language

**(3) To what extent are university scholars legitimate in talking about queer activism without being part of it?**

The last and shortest part of the discussion was dedicated to the legitimacy of university scholars in talking about social movements, without themselves being part of the movements. The opinions moved around the fact that there is the tendency for academics to be mistrusted, if they are activists too. The following statement from Jan, the freelance scholar, is relevant:

Jan: 'I am studying queer in the Nordic countries. When I go to Copenhagen, the academics do not want to be interviewed by me as activist. Generally, they don't want to be seen or interviewed as activists in something that will come into the academic field, and they don't give people's name just like that, as there is so much distrust, and the state power is seen as so oppressive, and the queer movement seen as so contentious, that people's names are sensitive info in Copenhagen.'

Fewer opinions related to the fact that queer studies in particular are totally disconnected from social reality, admitting however that this is the general tendency of all sciences. Giacomo, who studied natural sciences, said:

Giacomo: 'In all kinds of research, also mine, there are some writers who are idiosyncratic and lack connection with practical reality. But I think that queer studies are more disconnected than other fields'

To sum up, what I found illuminating in the focus group discussion was the fact that participants in the festival were aware of the links between queer politics and queer academic discourse. Therefore, the legitimacy of the production of queer academic discourses for queer festivals is largely accepted. This is manifested in the demand for further linkages with existing academic discourses. This demand is particularly stressed by people with no institutional connections with academia. I interpret this narrative as the continuing of the intellectual authority that queer studies have on queer festivals. I



observed however an emerging critique addressed to academics and to those who perform ‘academic activism’, manifested in the demand by queer activists to be taken more seriously in the process of the production of queer academic discourse. As the individual testimonies in the interviews will demonstrate, in reality, the use of queer vocabulary is much more complex than it sounded in the focus group.

### 7.3.2 Experiences from queer vocabulary

#### *Copenhagen*

*Five days before the beginning, after the preparatory meeting.*

*We drink beers with Liza and Sarah, both on the organization committee. Sarah comes up with a question: ‘During the preparatory meeting, one member from the organization committee said something like ‘essentiality’. Do you know what it means?’ Liza corrects her: ‘Essentialism. It is a word used extensively in academia.’ Sarah smiled and said: ‘Yes, I realized that it had to do with that’. Her voice was full of irony.<sup>120</sup>*

Back in 2011, during the second day of the Copenhagen queer festival, there was a call for activists willing to organize the sex party and arrange the ‘sex space’. The sex party would take place the following night. The group of people interested in organizing the sex party gathered in order to discuss and set up the sex space. During the plenary of the following day, the sex party committee revealed the most important challenge: the separation of the sex space into gender-restricted zones. In fact, the sex party committee ended up by deciding to divide the sex space into four distinct zones, according to the experienced gender of each participant. Thus, the following four zones were proposed: cis-females, cis-males, trans, and mixed. This division was made only after much discussion, mostly because of opposition to the anti-identitarian narrative of queer identity.

Vladimir, a 35-year old cis-man working in a call centre in Berlin, had been visiting the

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<sup>120</sup> Field Notes, Copenhagen, July 2013

Copenhagen queer festival for the previous four years. He participated on the sex space committee. In the last part of the interview, when we had already started discussing his relation to queer activism, he started narrating the story of the 'sex space' on his own:

'Yesterday [On the second day of the festival] for example, I realized I was the only person in the... maybe one of the only persons in the room, who didn't know a term which was very important [He is not revealing the word. I am asking him]... 'cis'<sup>121</sup>. Do you know it? [I explain] Ok, these fucking idiots (laughter). Like that, I would have understood it... Maybe it's a question of language, and then I didn't; I understood it by context, but I didn't... (Copenhagen, July 2011)

Giacomo from Oslo shares a similar experience:

'I feel I miss elements of the language that I would like to understand more. That's definitely, I think, the point you were raising yesterday during the workshop<sup>122</sup>... As I mentioned, I think there is this gap between, that needs to be filled in, in terms of making things more approachable also for the everyday. I think actually, I believe that probably our schools, and our basic education should include more for, in terms for example of gender studies and you know also would make people, even people that might not feel directly connected to these issues, I think it would be very helpful for society.' (Oslo, September 2011).

The issue of *queer vocabulary* shows up at various moments of festivals' everyday life. As the exchange between Liza and Sarah made clear, the use of academic jargon inside the festivals is the result of some activists' familiarity with it. In contrast, people with no institutional affiliation with academic training feel as if they lack the language which would enable them to participate fully. Robin, organizing member of the Amsterdam

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<sup>121</sup> The word 'cis' or 'cisgender', a neologism used widely in queer activist and theoretical contexts, is used '[instead of the more popular 'gender normative'] to refer to people who do not identify with a gender diverse experience, without enforcing existence of a "normative" gender expression' (Green, 2006: 247). In other words, cis (-gender) describes the situation in which an individual's experience of their own gender matches the sex they were assigned at birth. It is usually used as the opposite of 'trans-gender'.

<sup>122</sup> He refers to the workshop I organized at the Oslo queer festival with the title 'Queer activism and Academia'

festival, participated in the Copenhagen festival in 2011. In answer to my question why he considers queer politics as important to his life, he turns the discussion towards his desire to learn more about it at the theoretical level:

‘I want to continue my studies in gender relations and specifically masculinities and femininities. And how masculinities shift and also looking at oppression, and how masculinity shifts under oppression, in different kinds of oppression, whether it’s violent like in social context or political context, like under occupation or whether it’s not as violent but still oppressed by the mainstream community. So, I don’t find myself in mainstream LGBT frames. And that’s why joining this queer collective [Queeristan in Amsterdam] I found that there are no limits and we got for at least more education, giving more information.’ (Copenhagen, July 2011).

Here is another example, taken from the QuEar festival in Berlin. When I start my interview with Gem, an Israeli girl, she says at the very beginning of her interview:

‘The queer part came after, like learning more about gender. Maybe I’m the only one you interviewed that didn’t study gender studies (laugh). No? [Asking me]. [Expression of relief]...’ (Berlin, August 2011)

Vladimir acknowledges his lack of knowledge of the term ‘*cis*’. I believe that this lack is not connected to the fact that English is not his mother tongue. It is rather related to his lack of familiarity with this linguistic field. It is not surprising, also, that Giacomo had a similar experience in Oslo (*‘I learned a couple of days ago what that is [‘cis’] and I had not heard about it earlier’*).

All three interviewees have different reactions towards *queer vocabulary*. To continue Vladimir’s story, when I asked him if he had expressed at the time his unfamiliarity with the word ‘*cis*’, he said:

‘No, no, no, I didn’t ask. I was even... [Ashamed?], because it was very intense, it

was the discussion about the sex place and people were arguing, in a very polite way, but it was really ‘identity-challenge by the subversion of spaces’ and ‘shall we reproduce society within our festival?’ [Irony on the use of these phrases] And what the hell is happening here! And if I would have come with a question ‘what is ‘*cis*’ by the way?’ [Laugh]... (Copenhagen, July 2011)

Although ‘*cis*’ was widely used during the discussions on the sex space, Vladimir did not dare ask what it meant. To my assumption that he had asked its definition, Vladimir replied ‘No, no, no, I didn’t ask’. In order to describe his awkward position inside the sex space organization group, he uses self-deprecating irony. It is true, as he said, that everybody else was deep in serious discussion, using complex and sophisticated catchphrases and expressions, such as ‘identity-challenge by the subversion of spaces’ or ‘shall we reproduce society within our festival’. By questioning what the word ‘*cis*’ meant, he might have provoked reactions from the rest of the group, and been put in an uncomfortable position. Vladimir’s story foregrounds the solution suggested during the focus group that ‘people should ask when they do not know some words’. Feelings of submission to dominant judgments can easily prevent people from asking such kinds of questions (Bourdieu, 1997; see also Samuel, 2013: 401).

I need to note also that Vladimir narrates this story at a point where I am asking him how he perceives queer in general. The fact that he produces a story that he experienced recently shows that from an abstract level of identity theorization (‘What is queer?’), the discussion moves towards the concrete level of experience. Somehow the theoretical concept of queer is not only a celebratory, optimistic political tool, but it brings with it also power relations, obstacles, and raises internal boundaries, connected to language.

On the other hand, Giacomo is not attacking the terminology used inside the festivals per se, neither does he get angry about its use. He rather attributes the lack of such knowledge to educational structures, which do not provide people with the opportunity to explore questions of gender and sexuality at schools through courses on gender and sexuality. Both Giacomo and Robin, however, consider their experiences with queer

festivals as a motivation to continue their studies, by focusing this time on gender and sexuality. Therefore, the lack of familiarization with queer vocabulary can function more as an incentive for further intellectual exploration.

Gem, finally, admitted that she still hadn't read Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*,<sup>123</sup> the landmark of queer theory, because, she argued, of its complex vocabulary and dense meanings<sup>124</sup>. Her narrative is surprisingly similar to that of Kate's during the focus group, when she admitted that she hadn't read *Gender Trouble* too, but wished to do so soon. Apparently, Gem, who hasn't completed any university studies, feels connected to the queer festival more because of the alternative lifestyle, rather than on linguistic and theoretical grounds. Her expressive corporeality confirms this assumption: semi-shaved hair, and feminist tattoos.

To explore the connections between the different educational dispositions and habitus of the actors, it is interesting to compare Gem's history with that of Chris. Chris is an American university teacher in Oslo. We met at the Oslo queer festival. English is Chris' mother tongue and he holds a doctorate degree in English language:

'[In the late 80s] queer came on the scene and to be honest I didn't really understand it until I began my doctoral degree where I had to have queer theory. So, that's when I sat down and read Judith Butler, and I would just, it was very difficult *even for a native speaker*. It's very difficult. So I just kept reading and would go back and re-read it until I understood it. Now it's a lot easier, because there's a lot of secondary literature on Butler, that at that time I didn't have access, *I was just reading Butler*. This became a sort of passion, while I was doing my doctorate.' (Oslo, September 2011)

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<sup>123</sup> *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Eve Kosofsky's, *Epistemology of the closet* (1990) constitute the two books, which initiated queer theory within academia. Their publication coincides with the mobilization of ACT-UP in the USA, and the beginning of queer activism (see Introduction).

<sup>124</sup> Butler's texts circulate also in zines. See next part on veganism

In both cases, queer theory seems to be a cultural and political target to achieve. People with different educational backgrounds are familiar with this ideological legacy of queer politics. The degree of achievement in its incorporation, however, varies according to the different educational disposition of each actor.

### 7.3.3 Conclusions to the linguistic part: Judith Butler's legacy

Stories from queer festivals are connected and repeated. Narratives from activists in different contexts seem to link to common processes, which will be expanded and analysed later, as I move through this chapter. These stories are very important, precisely because they shed light on the way the organization of an event and its identity building is inextricably linked to language. In our stories, as they were also manifested in the focus group, the boundaries are mostly shaped by the use of a specific vocabulary. This vocabulary connects clearly with academic discourses. Its legacy creates political and cultural imaginaries on what a queer activist should know and should read. The boundaries are not however stable, and do not affect everybody the same way. The degree of ease in navigating the field of queer vocabulary differs according to activists' incorporation of these specific linguistic codes. In other words, these codes create the normative assumption that participants in the festivals *should* know at least the main principles from queer theory. This does not signify that people have in reality necessarily read or explored the concepts (and jargon) of queer studies. Being part of a festival, however, makes one aware of the linguistic authority of queer academic jargon for that festival. Thus, queer theory is seen as the ideological inspiration of queer festivals.

I contend that this ideological legacy comes from two main factors. First, queer theory still holds the authority of being the *ideological source* of the whole queer movement. Second, this authority is reified through actors who are trained in this jargon and disseminate it inside the festivals. In the first case, people feel, at least at the imaginary level, as connected to the discursive legacy of queer theory, its exemplary figure being Judith Butler. Though slightly more nuanced, these relations of activists to the discursive

authority of queer theory might remind us the links between the worker-members of the communist parties and the books of Marx and Lenin, during the 60s and the 70s, or Maoists with the Red Book. In the second case, those familiar with these theories usually come from gender studies departments and hold high-level academic degrees (master's or PhDs). Their academic status is high.

On the other hand, activists or participants who have not incorporated academic linguistic dispositions tend to cede the authority to queer theory, as a strategy of fighting against festivals' majoritarian cultural codes, which remind them where the ideological legacy of the movement lies. This does not imply however that these actors will certainly become familiar with these readings, as the testimonies reveal: 'I feel like I should read *Gender Trouble*' (Oslo Focus Group) or 'Maybe I'm the only one you interviewed who hasn't done gender studies' (Interview Gem, Berlin, 2011). By negotiating their position towards these linguistic codes, according to their own habitus, actors express a sort of disidentification (Munoz, 1999). However, they do not comply automatically with the codes, since in reality they often just carry on *not* reading the normative texts. On the other hand, they continue to attribute the authority of queer festivals to queer academic discourses, without rejecting them completely, and even suggest further training. In both cases, queer theory is somehow present, either in the vocabulary circulating within the festivals, or in the discussions taking place in the focus groups and other workshops. In this sense, part of queer identity is constructed upon the legacy of queer theory. *Queer vocabulary* becomes one particular style of communication, upon which identity work takes place.

#### 7.4 'Mmmm...Vegan is so tasty': Food practices

*'Sunday, May 20<sup>th</sup>. 14:00-15:30 B.Y.O. [Bring-It-Yourself] Vegan\* Brunch*

*Queeristan is a vegan space!'*

*(Queeristan Program, May 2012)*

*'Next time someone will impose me vegan food, I will bring a huge piece of pork and eat it in  
front of everyone'*

*(Pietro, Workshop 'Queer activism and Class', Queeristan, Amsterdam, 2012)*

*'Whatever comes from the middle class is not necessarily bad'*

*(Lena, Workshop 'Queer and Class', Copenhagen Queer festival 2011)*



*Workshop 'Queer activism and class', Queeristan festival*

*Last day, Amsterdam, May 2012*

*One of the main topics of discussion was the vegan character of the festival. Participants attempt to understand how the selection of a specific food practice relates (or not) to class issues. Supporters of the festival's vegan character are not only vegans. Daniel, a Turkish artist living in Amsterdam, raises his hand:*

*- 'Although I am not a vegan, I support the festival to be vegan. We need to create a collective ethos, which can be also based upon this alimentary practice.'*

*- 'Yes, but what about the imposition of the festival as vegan?', a woman from the public shouts.*

*Pietro, an Italian studying in Amsterdam, in agreement with her, says angrily:*

*- 'Next time someone will impose me vegan food, I will bring a piece of pork meat and eat it in front of everyone.'*

*I ask him why such a reaction. He explains that he was really mad about the B.I.Y. [Bring-It-yourself] brunch organized that morning. In fact, that morning, organizers did not provide us with collective cooking, as was the case during the other days of the festival. The idea was to organize a B.I.Y. brunch. According to this idea, participants would bring any food they wanted and share it with the others. The only condition: food had to be vegan. Pietro explained that he could not understand why he could not bring meat, since the brunch was B.I.Y.'*

*[...]*

*Giulia, another Italian participant, criticizes veganism, using concepts from materialist theory. According to her, some of the vegan food is produced very far from Europe. Therefore, she suggests that we should always take into account both the modes of production, as well as the moral ideology of veganism.*

*[...]*

*As a final compromise, vegan participants of the workshop on 'Queer activism and class' admit that the festival's choice on being vegan should be at least explained on the website of the festival and not be taken as for granted by the organizational committees.*<sup>125</sup>

This story from Amsterdam reveals the dynamics and controversies that food, and specifically veganism, creates inside the queer spaces. In reality, it illustrates how food can serve as a practice which builds a collective identity. I see food practices as another 'mode of address' (Warner, 2002), which shapes a counterpublic and gives meaning to a collective identity. Collective cooking and eating is not a new phenomenon for squatted-oriented movements. Queeruption festivals used to provide their participants with meals (Brown, 2007: 2693-2696). Gavin Brown stresses that collective cooking is a way to challenge 'the individualising ideological norms of neoliberal capitalism', because 'collective cooking for a large ensemble, or the ethos of skill sharing' is an 'attempt to ensure that collective responsibility is taken for the smooth functioning of the event' (2007: 2696). As part of the squatting culture, therefore, queer festivals are also familiar with collective cooking.

Through the tensions and the differences in the interpretations concerning collective cooking, and especially veganism, I will expose the degree to which food becomes a component for the construction of identity-work in queer festivals. I will start by presenting the collective meals as a main ritual of queer festivals, which attributes regularity and shapes the collective ethos through the practice of cooking and eating in large ensembles. I will then focus on the vegan character of these meals, as an attempt to build an oppositional cultural style, which gives shape to counterpublics.

The great majority of queer festivals practise collective cooking and eating<sup>126</sup>. The biggest festivals tend to organize three meals per day: breakfast, lunch, and dinner, while the smallest ones usually provide only dinners. Apart from viewing it as part of the

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<sup>125</sup> Field Notes, Amsterdam, May 2012

<sup>126</sup> Apart from festivals which are more art-oriented, such as the *QuEAR* festival in Berlin

construction of a collective affinity, queer festivals organize collective meals as a strategy to obtain financial resources, since the meals are extended not only to the squatters themselves, but also to external participants, and they are much cheaper than a usual meal in a commercial restaurant. Moreover, collective cooking holds a symbolic importance, to the degree that it resists the individualizing norms of contemporary capitalism, as promoted through fast-food multinational companies. Thus, most of the products used in the cooking process are collected from dumpster-diving practices, through activists approaching supermarket chains to take the vegetables to be thrown away. It is mainly dumpster-diving that sustains the meals in the festivals. Finally, after the end of every meal, ‘collective washing’ is practised; every person is supposed to wash her dirty dishes in a sort of a DIY washing place.

This practice of collective cooking is however very strictly channeled through vegan norms. Festivals in Northern Europe basically provide only vegan food, while the organizers quickly oppose any possibility of including meat or meat products in the daily meals. Queer festivals promote veganism through their official discourses and the practice of collective cooking:

‘All the food served on the festival is vegan. If you have allergies let us know and we will make sure there is also food for you. There is vegan food three times a day’  
(Copenhagen Queer festival)<sup>127</sup>

‘You will get vegan lunch and dinner every day for donations, and free breakfast...We promise you free nice accommodation and very nice vegan food’  
(Oslo queer festival).

‘**Sunday, May 20th** 14:00-15:30 B.Y.O. [Bring-It-Yourself] Vegan\* Brunch  
Queeristan is a vegan space’ (Queeristan festival, Amsterdam)

Written texts available inside the festivals also remind people of the importance of veganism for queer and feminist politics, and stress its connections to the wider

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<sup>127</sup> <http://www.queerfestival.org/practicainfo.html>

movements of anarchism. The zine 'Straight edge, veganism and identity politics' on sale at the Copenhagen queer festival contains texts which link veganism with race and class issues. Texts like 'Our bodies are battlefields', 'Rights or Liberation' and an interview with Judith Butler fill the pages of this DIY publication.

Everyday stories also reveal the vegan character of the festivals. As the following story from the preparatory discussions of the Copenhagen queer festival in July 2011 demonstrates, veganism is always a matter up for discussion, although its implementation in the end is always confirmed.

*Copenhagen, Preparatory assembly. Two days before the festival begins  
Food issues are raised in the discussion. The organization committee confirms the  
vegan character of the festival. I am surprised at this unquestioned confirmation,  
until Morgan, a member of the organizing committee, raises her hand:*

*'Sometimes, I have the impression that we see things in a monolithic way. We should never  
forget that there are people who do not eat meat, but they are still vegetarians, not vegans.  
Concerning meat, do you know any Chinese person knowing the concept of vegan?'*<sup>128</sup>

Although Morgan's concern did not lead to a reconsideration of the festival's vegan character, her intervention questioned the 'biopolitics of food', or the process through which 'ethical concerns over food come to displace troubling questions of white privilege and a complex politics of class and social mobility' (Brown, forthcoming: 10). In fact, the festivals' prioritization of food and animal concerns over class or race issues is characteristic of white, middle-class youth with strong subcultural identities which tend to create environments that people of colour find unwelcome (Juris, 2013: 57). Thus, food choices have the negative potential of reinforcing the lack of class and racial diversity inside the festivals. As to this profound lack of engagement with class and race issues and the relation to vegan food, the following story is also illuminating:

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<sup>128</sup> Field Notes, Copenhagen, July 2011

*Copenhagen queer festival, July 2011*

*Workshop 'Queer and Class'*

*One participant raises the middle-class character of vegan food. A Swedish trans activist thus reacts: 'Whatever comes from middle classes is not necessarily bad'. Another female participant admitted however that [vegan] food should be considered as a 'discouraging characteristic' for people who are not familiar with this alimentary practice, pointing to the idea that queer activism fails to attract people from lower classes. I am thinking that every time the vegan issue is raised, concerns focusing on the issues of class and racial exclusions emerge<sup>129</sup>*

Despite criticisms, the Copenhagen queer festival kept a very strict position on veganism, revealed also by the following story:

*The organizers had managed to make a deal with a neighbouring bakery, to collect all their food remains unsold every night at 19.00. Jane, a female participant, and I took over the responsibility to bring the food from the bakery to the festival. The first day we brought the food, the organizing committee realized that among the various bakery products, there were a dozen meat sandwiches. It was decided ad hoc that the meat sandwiches should be immediately thrown away. After the resistance of a couple of activists however, it was decided that they should be put in the fridge, strictly separated from the vegan food, and certainly not displayed with the other vegan food, during dinner.<sup>130</sup>*

Regarding the everyday experiences of activists, veganism does not coincide necessarily with people's ordinary lifestyles. In fact, many queer activists are not vegans in their everyday lives, as pointed out above in Daniel's statement: 'Although I am not a vegan, I support the festival to be vegan. We need to create a collective ethos, which can be also based upon this alimentary practice.' Zoe from the organizing committee of the Copenhagen festival shares a similar opinion:

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<sup>129</sup> Field Notes, Copenhagen, July 2011

<sup>130</sup> Field Notes, Copenhagen, July 2011

‘I am a vegetarian. I don’t call myself vegan because sometimes it happens that I eat eggs... or cheese but I almost don’t buy food at all. Only dumpster dive food<sup>131</sup>. So, when I find cheese or eggs of course I will eat it.’ (Copenhagen, July 2011)

Festivals’ choice of vegan food is seen as a strategy of radical inclusion. The rationale is that vegan food is inclusive. Vegans, vegetarians and meat-eaters can eat vegan food, whereas in the opposite case, vegans or vegetarians would be excluded. This is the basic argument that the organizers from Amsterdam, Oslo and Copenhagen made. I aspire to a more historical-cultural explanation, which links veganism with anarchy-feminism and punk subculture. Zoe provides us with an explanation similar to my own:

‘At first, when I heard that you can actually join animal rights with female rights, I was like ‘what??’ But then, there is this idea of speciesism<sup>132</sup>... that you can connect to feminism or racism...you just don’t treat live beings equally. And, someone asked me that ‘Yes, but how can you just draw this connection?’ I mean animals are not humans... but I said like, yeah, in the whole feminist theory women are treated as others. Not as humans. And the same was with black people, and all the others, they were called like Jews, they were not good humans, they were called other humans or others or whatever... This is the same with animals. I don’t argue that animals are humans but I think like they have feelings and emotions and there should be treated the fairest, equally. And the pain is equal, and discrimination is equal. I would really like to [raise] this consciousness about animals and gay rights and female rights to be more popular within the queer scene for example. I think it would be really nice to discuss it’ (Copenhagen, July 2011)

According to Zoe, veganism, as part of the broader animals’ rights movement, is not (yet) incorporated deeply in queer activism. Therefore, more discussion and further consciousness-raising concerning this issue should be developed within queer circles.

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<sup>131</sup> Dumpster diving is ‘one among many tactics used to create an independent ‘subsistence economy’ outside of capitalism’ (Barnard, 2011: 423). It consists of sifting through commercial or residential [trash](#) to find items that have been discarded by their owners.

<sup>132</sup> ‘Speciesism was first conceptualized by Richard Ryder as a form of prejudice against nonhuman animals, analogous to sexism and racism’ (Cole and Morgan, 2011: 135)

Certainly Zoe's account is biased by her own involvement in the punk scene and the consequent development of a punk habitus, which is clearly connected to veganism (Cherry, 2006: 157)<sup>133</sup>. Her way of dressing, the piercings and the tattoos she has on her body reveal a clear identification with the punk subculture. Her narratives do not deny this connection:

'I travel a lot around Europe...around punk festivals, and there I think about my identity, I think it's more important to me be a punk, than to be a queer...This festival, I like it very much, but I don't really feel that it's like my place to be. I feel more at home when I'm at a punk show, really. Even with straights. It's a matter of ideas' (Zoe, Copenhagen, July 2011)

For Zoe, queerness seems to function as a disidentificatory process, as a 'survival strategy' against mainstream heteronormativity, which is also present in some parts of the punk scene (Munoz, 1999). Since radical vegans are inextricably associated with punk subcultures, Zoe's opinion that the queer festival in Copenhagen *was not so vegan* is not surprising.

Although Zoe feels that there is not enough discussion on veganism and animal rights, a long-term observation reveals contradictory results. The Queeristan festival Amsterdam (2013), part itself of this vegan ethos, organized a workshop called 'What's queer about animal liberation?' The organizers of the workshop, two punk-style activists from Brazil, advertised their event on the programme of the festival with the following words:

'The idea of this workshop is to have a discussion about unlearning speciesism and exploring the intersections between anarchism, queer and animal liberation. We hope to create a space for challenging oppressive dynamics and biological justifications of

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<sup>133</sup> According to Cherry, punks tend to identify with the strictest definition of veganism, compared to non-punks

supremacy, exploring veganism and vegan space, and its connection to radical egalitarian politics and praxis.’ (Queeristan Festival, 2013)<sup>134</sup>

It is surprising to see how many of these words and expressions are also part of Zoe’s story: speciesism, anarchism and animal liberation, radical politics. Thus, discourses promoted in all the festivals, mostly in Northern Europe, reveal a specific circulation of words that clearly attempt to set up the connections between queerness and veganism. The number of discussions, the debates on the food practices of the festivals, and the controversies on these issues are a common theme in every festival.

#### 7.4.1 The Roman exception

One festival, however, escapes the vegan paradigm. The queer festival in Rome followed a slightly different food policy. The food was prepared by an autonomous women’s squat, which collected the money for its own political project, and distributed some of the benefits to QueerLab, the main organizer of the festival. The meals consisted of a meat and a vegetarian option. In general terms, no vegan policy was followed whatsoever, while meat was displayed freely. Moreover, no collective cooking was followed as practice, since the food used to come already cooked in the women’s squat, and carried to the festival at Teatro Valle. Organizers opted for solidarity with the women’s squat, since it was they who were collecting the profit, rather than the construction of a collective-cooking ethos.

When I asked Casimiro, one of the organizers, about the absence of a vegan policy in the festival, he told me that:

‘I have to say that among us [the organizing committee] it was not a big debate issue; actually there was nobody who even proposed it...And in any case I don't know any squat in Rome providing just vegan food... Our "national" culture is meat-based!’ (Casimiro, electronic communication, 2013)

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<sup>134</sup> <http://queeristan.org/2013/05/21/workshop-whats-queer-about-animal-liberation/>



It seems that Casimiro, as part of the organization committee of the queer festival in Rome, ascribes the absence of vegan policy to the ‘national’ culture of the squatting scene, which is considered meat-based. This narrative can easily be contested, however, because one of the main objectives of the festival in Rome was to attract a transnational constituency, with invitees and participants from all over Europe. There was no complaint however about the absence of vegan food, despite the participation of Northern European queer crews in the event. As Casimiro explains:

‘The only complaint was that people thought it was a kind of professional profit-oriented catering...it was not very clear it was a women squat doing it as a way to fund themselves’ (Electronic communication, December 2013)

#### 7.4.2 Conclusions to veganism

The debates on the ‘biopolitics of food’ (Brown, forthcoming: 10), which take place in the queer festivals, demonstrate that food controversies are themselves part of the process of the construction of a queer collective identity. This is mainly for two reasons: First, strategically, vegan food is used as the minimal compromise of all the food tastes. Even if someone is vegetarian or carnivore, she can also be a vegan. The inverse is not true. Furthermore, in this way, the festival avoids alimentary tensions related to religion (pork, beef etc.). Therefore, it is presented as inclusive rather than exclusive, since it can encompass everyone. This aspect of inclusiveness relates to the multiple-identities paradigm, as manifested in Chapter 6.

Second, historically and theoretically, vegan ideology is closely connected to anarcha-feminism and the punk subculture, which constitutes one of the constituents of the queer lifestyle, as we will see in the following section. The rhetoric is based on the idea that animals are equally part of the oppressive apparatus of humanity, similar to women, who were not considered as fully human (unlike their male counterparts) until recently. This is the aspect which gets closer to the anti-identitarian idea of queer politics, if we see the

anti-identitarian framework, together with animal liberation, as two critiques emanating from poststructuralist ‘efforts to unseat the normative “liberal humanist” subject’ (Fraiman, 2012: 106).

In both cases, food practices confirm the assumption that food constitutes a political style, similar to other modes of addressing the political. It is useful therefore for the understanding of the construction of counterpublics. These counterpublics oppose mainstream ways of food production and consumption. By putting vegan food at the forefront of the political struggle, queer festivals (in Northern Europe) broaden the agenda of what queer should mean and what it would imply. Thus, veganism speaks with its own voice to the construction of queer anti-identitarian identity. In the meanwhile, the production and distribution of food, either by the festivals themselves or by other squats (as in the case of Rome), promotes a specific anti-individualizing and anti-fast food ethos.

I also exposed the limits of veganism as part of identity building. People from within the spaces express their own resistance to the imposition of veganism, warning of the lack of diversity, of class and of people from ethnic backgrounds in the festivals. This contradicts the festivals’ official discourses on the inclusive character of vegan food. I would like to end this part on veganism, by presenting the argument stated in the text ‘Our bodies are battlefields’, from the zine ‘Straight edge, veganism and identity politics’. According to the text:

‘People who argue that eating meat is natural utilize these primitivist fantasies of brown folks...as meat eating savages’... [On the other hand] ‘The pro-veganism arguments often invoke Asia...as a site where veganism has always been the norm, homogenizing an entire continent’. [In both cases] ‘Vegan histories are often suspiciously White. People of color get relegated to a sort of vegan

anthropology...Folks of color, when used in these arguments, are Othered, and reduced from peoplehood to human bodies'<sup>135</sup>

The text opposes both the naturalizing discourse of veganism and its antithetical class/race exclusionary discourse, as essentializing the non-Western Other, attributing arguments of homogenization and dehumanization. This voice I traced in the written text never found its oral space in the festivals.

### 7.5 'I am trash, because I like it': Corporeal expressivity

"Clothes have more important offices than merely to keep us warm;  
they change our view of the world and the world's view of us."  
--Orlando, Virginia Woolf

1. *At around 16.30 of the third day of the festival, the preparations for the Slutwalk demonstration started. Activists and participants started making themselves up, trying different varieties of clothes, and making sexual jokes the one to the other. These preparations were taking place within the Teatro Valle Occupato. Participants explored the wardrobe of the theatre and experimented in various ways of dressing, using the most incredible and incompatible materials. The principle was however quite specific: gender transgression and/or hypersexualization for both boys and girls. Of course, there was no obligation, and in fact, some people did not really participate in the dressing and makeup preparations. The majority however improvised with all the material available there. Many boys and men in particular stressed a very feminine, eccentric style, which seemed to be parodying the normalized codes of dressing according to a binary system of male/female gender. Other men adapted to gay male subcultures. Casimiro, for example, dressed in gym clothes, although he also wore a necklace and put glitter on his face. Women diversified their appearances as well. Many of them adapted to a cabaret culture, with elegant, sexy clothes, whereas others adopted a more pulp fiction esthetics, with blue and pink wigs, mini skirts etc. While preparing, at some point someone screamed: 'we are freaks'. And indeed,*

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<sup>135</sup> Royce Drake 'Our bodies are battlefields'. In the zine: Straight edge, veganism and identity politics'. Copenhagen, 2011

*once we moved out of the theatre and onto the street, this was what we were, a freak show with diversified esthetics, with incoherent dressing styles, transgressive gender roles, and provocatively sexualized. The Slutwalk was ready to start.*<sup>136</sup>

## *2. Oslo, Final day of the festival, 25 September 2011*

*I am walking out of the squat with Noris. We head towards a gay bar. Its name is 'London'. We enter and get some drinks. 'I'm twice married' he says. 'I married him to give him the nationality. He's American and he wanted to stay in Europe'. 'Does marriage kill love? I ask him. 'Love kills marriage', he responds. I am observing him. He is wearing three rings, 'Each one has its history', he says. He has many tattoos on the arms and the back. I am particularly impressed by one tattoo which shows a skeleton which instead of a skull has a television.*

The first extract from my field notes describes the preparatory atmosphere just before the beginning of the Slutwalk in Rome. It is an illustrative example of how dressing style is used as a channel to diffuse political messages. Freakish dress codes, which transgress traditional gender alignments, and promote an imprecise gender picture, are at the forefront. For instance, boys with beards wearing heavy makeup and skirts, or men with masculine gym clothes and very elegant female necklaces. Furthermore, *femmes* lesbians<sup>137</sup> with overly feminized clothes, and S/M leather dykes. Style and clothes constitute modes of address which carry strong political significations. By operating outside of 'traditional rationalistic verbal discourse' (Penney, 2013: 291), dressing styles contribute to the construction of identifiable publics with shared understandings of what constitutes transgression. Style has therefore both external and internal effects (See Chapter 4 on the Slutwalk). Externally, it becomes eminently visible in the public space.

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<sup>136</sup> Field notes, Rome, April 2013

<sup>137</sup> *Femme* is a lesbian category, which links sex and gender, but challenges the connection between gender and sexual orientation, since femmes are 'being attracted to women, although where this is or is understood to be for masculinity it can also be recuperated by the heterosexual imaginary'. (Eves, 2004: 487).

Internally, it forges feelings of belonging, functioning as a powerful tool for the shaping of collective identities.

By attempting to challenge dominant cultural codes, dress becomes one of the several processes in the construction of the queer anti-identitarian identity-work. Dress styles function as strategies for the transgression of dominant cultural categories. They construct gender as a set of stylistic expressions, reflected in the bodies and the clothes that gendered bodies wear (Warner, 2002). As bell hooks claims, style holds a transgressive and transformative potential, making it 'one example of counter-hegemonic cultural practice' (1990: 22). These stylistic transgressions attempt to demonstrate the constructed character of gender and sexual identities. As in the case of drag performers, queer activists attempt to show that identities do not 'begin and end with the physical body' (Taylor et al., 2004: 127).

I see these stylistic transgressions as strategies by which to oppose the dominant codes of gender binaries as perpetuated within society. These externally-oriented strategies do not escape however from already established subcultural aesthetics, creating processes of 'disidentification' (Munoz, 1999). Thus, disidentification through dress codes functions as an appropriation of both dominant and subcultural codes, which create in their turn new forms of identity. Dressing styles are therefore crucial for the internal function of the festivals. In reality, they become markers of the solidification process of a sense of belonging, and therefore they attribute meaning to the anti-identitarian narrative of queer festivals. This play with dressing codes and styles comes to reinforce the queer ideology of 'gender performativity', according to which gender is a set of reified practices and performances, constructed across time, and varying according to space and social interactions. Thus, gender identity is never fixed or biologically given, but rather acquired through various power relations and discursive formations to which we are all subjected. Dress functions as a disruptive strategy to the degree that it is manipulated, even ridiculed, by the activists. These strategies have a double objective. First, they want to demonstrate the limits of the idea of the binary stability of two genders. Second, they

set as aim to conflate the links between gender and sexuality, by unfolding them as two distinct categories, which although linked, can also be radically separated (Butler, 1990).

Dressing codes are not explicitly discussed inside the festivals; neither do they become the explicit focus of discussions in the workshops. To a certain extent, dressing styles speak for themselves; they have an autotelic *raison d'être*. They compete with each other silently through participants' dress choices.

Activists, in particular, who have been in the scene for many years, function as the reference point for queer style. Having accumulated a militant capital, built over time, through their participation in the squatting queer circles, these activists' styles set the norms of what it is to look queer. Based upon my observation, I distinguished three broad categories of dressing styles: (a) punk, (b) trash, and (c) ordinary. I could easily confirm that all styles are equally represented in the festivals, although punk constitutes the minority. I acknowledge the limits of this categorization, because of the large variety of inventive styles and the mixing of styles. I use them however for analytical purposes, in order to support the idea of how style can become a marker of collective identification, as a tool operating beyond rationalistic-verbal discourse. I do not take into account performance styles or drag, which are usually displayed during the night performances, but limit the descriptions to the styles as performed in the everyday interactions within the festivals.

a. *Punk*: It is very common for activists, especially those affiliated with the squatting, anarchist/black bloc and vegan culture, to be dressed in punk style. This could be described as involving lots of piercings, jewelry, tattoos, while the tendency is to dress in black and red. Piercing of the nose, in particular, is a trademark of identification for punk queers. According to the narratives of people identifying with the punk culture, the body is a site of contestation, and thus punk codes manifest this choice of change.

*b. Trash esthetics/Hippies:* One other category of participants dresses as hippies. In the case of cis-boys, this is manifested as a style that stems from of the mainstream gay one, as promoted within commercial gay bars and discos. Some cis-boys have long hair, and working-class straight-looking clothes. This style adopts sometimes a reinforced subcultural code, such as S/M, or sport style. People following sadomasochist practices, in particular, wear black leather clothes and jewelry in their everyday interactions inside the festival.

*c. Ordinary:* The majority of participants however show an accumulation of more or less normalized or mainstream dress codes. These are mostly people with no long experience in the scene, and usually outside of the organization committees, or actors with an established professional status. Visitors or random participants belong also to this majority. These styles are mostly eclipsed by the extravaganza of the two previous categories.

I argue that it is the two first categories (punk and trash), which function as the promoter of 'queer' style, and work as practices which reify the queer anti-identitarian identity. The trash style in particular carries many class signifiers, whereas the punk one has already been associated with white working-class subcultures (Hebdige, 1991). Although the punk style constitutes a minority, its links with veganism and the squatting culture make it particularly legitimate inside queer festivals. Punk's expressivity on the body conveys strong political and cultural messages. As Zoe, from the Copenhagen festival, stated about her nose piercing:

'For me it is really a punk thing to wear...I was always very interested in experimenting with my appearance, to cross the boundaries of what is pretty and what is ugly. I am also very interested in treating my body as a kind of a collage, that you can use a very nice makeup, and still have a piercing that some people might perceive as something really ugly. In Poland, this thing is really ugly; they really think that I look like as a pig, or a bull... I like to wear things that in their eyes make me ugly' (Copenhagen, July 2011)

Zoe comes originally from Poland, but lives now in Copenhagen. Her own reflections about what is considered pretty or ugly seem to trace back to Poland where she claims that such piercing is considered *animalesque* ('like a pig, a bull'). She acknowledges that the dressing style itself carries political signifiers; it challenges dominant ideas of beauty. At the same time, she portrays her body as a site of political contestation ('treating my body as a kind of collage').

Gem, from Berlin, holds similar ideas on how the body can become a site of 'transformation'. She supports the idea that her own tattoos (at that time she had four) transform her. In her narrative, she linked them to cultural references that inspire her. Among many, the most important was her admiration for PJHarvey, a punk-blues singing icon: 'This tattoo is the lyrics of PJHarvey's 'Snake'. I don't like PJHarvey, I worship. PJHarvey is god.' (Berlin, August 2011). PJHarvey functions as a symbol of feminist punk ethos, and the lyrics of the song that Gem has traced on her body are relevant: 'No need for god, no need for him. Just take my hand. You'll be my bride'. Similar tattoos are presented on queer performers. The accumulation of tattoos with punk or death-oriented symbolisms, as is the case for Noris is a particular feature of punk style, as illustrated in the field note extract No 2.

Trash esthetics is however more extensively diffused within the festivals. In reality, it is a style which does not require such a strong embodiment (no piercings or tattoos necessarily), as the punk one. It also fits the middle-class backgrounds of the majority of the activists and participants. What I call 'trash aesthetics' is linked, as the name suggests, to working-class style. It assembles a set of practices and cultural products, which represent low value and broad mediatization. The clothes used in this style could consist of used and torn jeans, tile shirts, braces, boots, used baskets and other similar. In that sense, we could trace a historical continuity between the appropriation of lower class products from white queer middle classes and the trash esthetics of the artistic



subcultures of the 60s and the 70s.<sup>138</sup> This trend of ‘trash aesthetics’ is part of a broader process of bringing this style of clothes to youth subcultures. It is facilitated by commerce, in the form of vintage shops, from where many activists get these clothes. This process starts from the 60s, when post-hippies, punks, students and others drawn to the subculture obtained a cheaper but more expansive wardrobe. These clothes survive nowadays in vintage/second-hand shops precisely because of their relatively good quality. They are used now in such a way that could look ‘trashy’, or that can be combined with various other styles of dressing. This vintage style depends on the ‘surplus of goods whose use value is not expended when their first owners no longer want them’ (McRobbie, 1997: 193).

Although popular class clothing is actually more practical and comfortable<sup>139</sup>, it does carry social signifiers (Bourdieu, 1984: 200). Queer activists who follow this particular mode of dressing mark their sympathy towards popular classes. Furthermore, some of them reject the heavy load of their middle class origins. It is what Sarah Thornton used to call ‘guilty of being trapped in their class’ when she was referring to the British working-class subcultures of the 90s (1997: 206). Clothes chains, such as H&M, have been described inside the festivals as providers of clothes, due to their low prices, and colourful and alternative styles. The practicality and the functionality that Bourdieu used to talk about do not seem to apply in queer festivals, since many participants wear heavy loads of clothes, jewelry, other accessories, and makeup, which is anything but comfortable.

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<sup>138</sup> ‘The white trash aesthetic championed during the 1960s and 1970s by such artists as Warhol and John Waters, who also included “over-the-top” camp... Regarding both concept and place, Waters made central the figure of the tragic trash queen through Divine and spent a fair amount of time in Provincetown. From 1966 to 1980, Waters spent what are now legendary summer seasons at Land’s End working at the Provincetown Bookstore, taking drugs, having sex, and writing the screenplays for *Eat Your Makeup* (1968), *Mondo Trasho* (1969), *Multiple Maniacs* (1970), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *Female Trouble* (1974), and *Desperate Living* (1977). Although Waters’s full-time residence is and has always been in Baltimore, like countless other queers he has treated Provincetown as a second home and has enjoyed there a sizable cult following for decades.’ (Krahulic, 2009: 12)

<sup>139</sup> Pierre Bourdieu used to say that ‘the working classes make a realistic or, one might say, functionalist use of clothing’ (1984: 200).

### 7.5.1 Conclusions to the Style part

Trash aesthetics and other alternative clothing modes are the dominant cultural trends in queer festivals. The construction of dressing styles within queer festivals is drawn more from what is generally admitted as disliked (formal clothing, mainstream gendered clothes, such as suits worn by men etc.); so the 'dressing code' can be seen as oppositional in nature. Although dressing as a 'real' queer is part of the collective identification process, just like all the other cultural practices, it does not lead to visible conflicts or other misunderstandings. It is more connected to the creation of 'symbolic boundaries', to generating feelings of similarity, against the mainstream (Lamont and Molnar, 2002: 168). In the end, it is this stylization of clothing that solidifies the counterpublic and adds to what queer should look like.

## 7.6 Conclusion

The principal objective of this chapter was to explore to what degree cultural practices inside queer festivals function as markers for the construction of their collective identity. This focus on practices is justified by the aim to reveal the practical precept of how queerness is experienced within festivals. I used language, eating and dressing as my dimensions of analysis, since they function as alternative communicative practices. In their attempt to challenge dominant representations, these three practices have a double role: an external and an internal one. Externally, they have a communicative function. By promoting specific styles of addressing the political -queer vocabulary, vegan collective eating, alternative dressing codes- queer festivals make 'identities and views known to the external society as a strategy of public rhetoric' (Penney, 2013: 290). Keeping in mind their oppositional character and their vision on social transformation (Fraser, 1990), queer festivals become arenas in which counterpublics emerge, due to their distinct expressive practices (Warner, 2002). Internally, these specific practices have as their objective to make queer identities known to fellow community members, as a means of

enhancing solidarity, and thus forging collective identity. Useful as it might be, I acknowledge the limits of this categorization, mainly because of the fluid boundaries between internal and external function.

The practices I analysed in this chapter were grouped under three broad categories: language, food, and dress. I focused on these practices because they carry strong political and cultural significations and they become the field upon which battles can take place. I demonstrated how the conflicts developing because of these practices attribute meaning about how queer identity *should* be. Language in particular is a crucial dimension for exposing the differences in the incorporation of queer codes'. I demonstrated that queer festivals' identity building is inextricably linked to language, and in particular to the use of a specific vocabulary. As demonstrated in the focus group, this vocabulary connects clearly with academic discourses. The degree of ease in navigating the field of queer vocabulary differs according to activists' incorporation of these specific linguistic codes, based on their individual educational trajectory. Being part of the festival makes someone aware of the linguistic authority of queer academic jargon. Through participants' accounts, it became clear that queer theory is still seen as the ideological inspiration of queer festivals, for two reasons: (a) queer theory holds the authority of being the *ideological source* of the whole queer movement. (b) This authority is reified through actors who are trained in this jargon and disseminate it inside the festivals. These actors usually come from gender studies departments and hold high-level academic degrees. Regarding activists or participants who have not incorporated academic linguistic dispositions, they usually accept queer theory's legacy. In both cases, part of queer identity is constructed upon the legacy of queer theory. *Queer vocabulary* becomes one particular style of communication, upon which identity work takes place. Queer festivals thus create their anti-identity collective identity by trying to implement queer vocabulary as a distinct communication practice, with a transformative effect.

I also used food controversies as a point from which to analyse the process of festivals' identity building. I focused in particular on veganism as a norm operating inside the

festivals. This happens for two main reasons: (a) strategically, vegan food is used as the minimal compromise of all food tastes. Therefore, the vegan choice conforms to the idea of inclusiveness, as part of the broader narrative of queerness as an inclusive identity. (b) Historically, vegan ideology is closely connected to anarcha-feminism and the punk subculture, which constitutes one of the constituents of queer lifestyle. This is the aspect which gets closer to the anti-identitarian idea of queer politics, if we see the anti-identitarian framework together with animal liberation as two critiques emanating from poststructuralist ‘efforts to unseat the normative “liberal humanist” subject’ (Fraiman, 2012: 106). I also exposed the limits of veganism as part of identity building. People from within the spaces expressed their own resistance to the imposition of veganism, pointing out the lack of participation from lower classes and people with ethnic backgrounds in the festivals, thus opposing the festivals’ official discourses on the inclusivity of vegan food.

Dressing practices were used as the third essential dimension of analysis of queer festivals’ identity-building. Contrary to the other cultural practices, dressing does not lead to discernible conflicts or other misunderstandings. It is connected to a silent creation of ‘symbolic boundaries’, of generating feelings of similarity, against the mainstream (Lamont and Molnar, 2002: 168). In the end, it is this stylization of clothing, which solidifies the counterpublic and adds to what queer should look like.

By analysing how these three sets of practices are promoted inside the festivals, and exposing the various degrees of incorporation by their public, I demonstrated how the construction of the queer anti-identitarian identity is best understood as the result of tensions provoked by battles over what *queer should look like*. In fact, none of the abovementioned practices are interpreted and incorporated in the same way by all the participants in the festivals. They are rather relationally constructed, depending on a series of parameters. Thus, the degree of engagement of the activists in the scene, their level of education, their socialization, and their involvement in other oppositional scenes (eg. punk) are fundamental dimensions in the introduction and reification of cultural

codes. In other words, the way activists' cultural and militant capital is applied and diffused in the festivals contributes to the constellation of the queer identity work. Based on concrete examples from linguistic, food and clothing practices, I explored the way participants in the queer festivals apply their cultural capital in the most everyday choices of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1984: 40).

By presenting cultural practices with specific codes unequally distributed among the festivals' publics, I conclude that every participant incorporates and contributes to queer festivals according to her placement within the field of cultural dispositions. These dispositions are embedded within several cultural practices. The discursive and practical battles occurring within the festival spaces contribute to the construction of 'queer codes'. This observation would seem to confirm the idea promoted by new social movement theorists that, far from posing a direct political confrontation against state structures, activists can mobilize through social movement communities, contesting assigned, existing identities, and producing new ones (Bereni and Revillard, 2012: 29). This production, of course, does not come without internal struggles over cultural codes, and their degrees of incorporation. These internal struggles, which reify continually the boundaries of a prefigurative space, confirm the idea that the building-process of a movement's collective identity is not isolated from the internal processes taking place inside the organization, and from the course of the movement's events. In that sense, it is problematic to conceive queer festivals as homogenous spaces, in which a specific collective identity incorporates a completely oppositional style, against exogenous normative understandings of gender and sexuality. This is actually what makes queer festivals not a subculture, but a counterpublic. In contrast to the Birmingham-school idea of subcultures as structurally oppositional homogenous blocs against dominant ones, queer festivals are rather open 'fields of cultural production' (Bourdieu, 1983), and as such they are subject to 'impose hierarchies of value and taste, to attempt the construction of exclusionary canons, to establish systems of cultural currency...and to legislate definitions of group belongingness'. (Lizardo and Skiles, 2008: 496)

Once more, it became clear that collective identities are not stable traits. They are not simply the result of the frames of a social movement, as is usually argued (Evans, 1997: 554). Collective identities are rather open, fluid and subject to the interpretations of activists and their contextual influences. They are thus negotiated not only at the rational deliberative level, but they are also addressed through ‘indecorous modes of intervention’ (McCann, 2011: 253). Thus, a centring on dressing and eating can constitute part of the ongoing process of collective identity formation. This observation applies particularly in movements with strong oppositional codes, where membership is not only a matter of sharing common goals, but also aspiring to the construction of new cultural codes, or the challenge to dominant ones. All of these practices relate to the fact that a collective identity tends to incorporate aspects which are not officially part of the frame of a social movement. Together with the previous chapters on organizational and transnational practices, this chapter seeks to enrich the concept of collective identity, by seeing it as an expanding term. Thus, queer identity is not only a result of coherent ideological discourse; it is not simply embedded in a rational-critical model of discourse which focuses on the constructed character of gender and sexuality. More importantly, queer is also embodied through norms and practices: queer signifies what to read, what to wear, what to eat. Through its normative practical reconfiguration, queer becomes another identity, which, by challenging dominant styles, creates its own style. Queer makes ‘expressive corporeality the material for the elaboration of intimate life among publics of strangers’ (Warner, 2002: 57).

Following this line of thought, I conclude that queer festivals’ identity work is inextricably linked to the creation of a public with transformative ideals. Participating in the festivals makes people active in the counterpublic, some more so and others less. It is only by shifting their attention to what is going on there, by incorporating the codes promoted within and by confronting their own habitus with that of others, that participants negotiate the collective identity of the festivals on a permanent basis (Warner, 2002: 61-62). Thus, queer festivals become arenas where embodied

counterpublics shape queer identity. The festivals function as channels for the circulation of discourses.

The limits, however, of the view of these counterpublics as embodied entities should also be acknowledged. Although festivals address an indefinite public, in reality they ‘select’ their participants by criteria of common social location, habitus and speech genres, such as the queer vocabulary. These common structural locations tend to attract radical middle-class youth. Although participants’ shared militant habitus could be seen as an easy factor for the solidification of festivals’ collective identity, this process can be easily obstructed, as long as festivals do not seek to address a wider public. The risk of self-referencing and ‘keeping it for ourselves’ (in other words, self-marginalizing) is present. For instance, Tobin, one of the Queeristan organizers, positions himself in favour of this self-marginalization:

‘[We need] More critique, more self-organization or spaces specifically. There is a lack of queer spaces in Amsterdam. So, for me, what is most important is to make possible, as much as possible queer spaces. They can be invisible; they *don’t have to be visible*. I oppose this sort of narrative of visibility. But, underground parties more, and to *draw more people in that*.’ (Amsterdam, May 2012)

Tobin’s statement illustrates very precisely both the advantages and the pitfalls of regarding the queer festival as a counterpublic. Although queer can be seen as an open identity, with fluctuating membership, the need (if any) to draw more people inside risks the mainstreamization of the movement. Thus, he proclaims that queer spaces do not need visibility and therefore discourse should circulate only among people who are already familiar with it. On Tobin’s contention, the risk of self-marginalization becomes more present. In contrast, the argument that festivals should ‘draw more people in’ signifies the ideal of members radicalizing the rest of society, rather than conceding in order to attract the more mainstream public.

## **Chapter 8. Conclusion**

### **What's next: Counterpublics and Democracy**

#### **8.1 The theoretical journey**

In the last chapter of my dissertation, I summarize the basic findings of my research. I then present some paths that my thesis opens up for future research, intertwined with some normative assumptions on queer politics.

The thesis explored the narrative of the 'anti-identitarian' collective identity as promoted by queer festivals in Europe. Festivals constitute a dynamic part of the queer movement's repertoire of action. This was the first study of queer political experiments in a transnational public space to use a detailed analysis of discourse and narrative, focus group, ethnography and survey. Moving away from strict comparative frames, I conducted a multi-sited ethnography across five European capitals, in six queer festivals that took place between July 2011 and June 2013. This multi-sited approach allowed for the identification of the *commonalities* that construct queer festivals today across the continent. By examining these commonalities, and the ways in which festivals are mobilized across the European space, I identified the emergence of oppositional transnational publics, with ambivalent connections to the state and to official public spheres.

My departure point was located in a paradox: that of building a sustainable repertoire of action based on an identity which pretends not to be one: an identity that sets as its aim to deconstruct any possible identities. Following the trend of previous research on 'emerging transnational 'micro-publics'', such as the European Social Forums (Doerr, 2009: 235), my dissertation continued the study of the transnational coalitions and



solidarities that have been, and are being built at the European level over recent decades, particularly after the establishment of the alterglobalization movement. Part of the broader Europeanization process, which affects not only institutions but also mobilization, everyday lives, and the formation of identities, queer festivals are participating gradually in the building of new political identifications. Despite all their commonalities with other transnational social movements, queer festivals present some distinct characteristics, which are mostly linked to their relationships with the official public spheres and the state: relationships which are fragmented, ambiguous and discontinuous.

The analytical part of the dissertation focused on the discourses and the practices which build queer festivals as political arenas at the transnational level. I demonstrated how participation in these arenas not only brings confrontation with new rational vocabularies, which challenge the dominant understandings of gender and sexuality, but becomes a means by which to invent new ways of performing politics, new ways of addressing the political. These new ways of addressing the political, or ‘modes of address’ as Warner (2002) calls them, are located in festivals’ organizational and cultural practices, which allow queer festivals to build transnational counterpublics. I acknowledged thereby the role of festivals in building alternative public spheres, against the dominant discursive understandings of gender and sexuality as they have been promoted in the official public spheres.

A ‘counterpublic’ approach to the analysis of festivals, and to identity studies, is in fact a productive enterprise. It allows us to consider repertoires of action not just as a result of actors’ calculations and rational decisions. The ‘counterpublic’ approach helps to identify the cultural processes which take place during collective action, and contribute to the solidification of collective identities, despite the fact that these movements proclaim an ‘anti-identitarian’ identity. In fact, the anti-identitarian character is seen in the promotion of specific discursive, organizational and cultural practices, subject to multiple understandings on the side of the activists and participants. These differences are

explained by actors' varied educational backgrounds and histories of militancy. Moreover, seeing specific political events –in my case queer festivals- as arenas which allow counterpublics to emerge shifts the focus of the research to the *practices* which sustain these arenas, and away from the frames, or strategic decisions which advance claims of a social movement against an institutional polity. Finally, the perspective of 'counterpublics' allows us to view politics not only as rational-critical debates about specific social problems, but also as a mode to suggest new ways of defining the political. These go beyond traditional verbal discourse, to alternative communication practices linked to corporeal and symbolic expression. In what follows, I will scrutinize the basic points of my initial assumptions, how they connect to my findings, and what kinds of new paths they open for future research.

## **8.2 Major findings and perspectives for research**

### **8.2.1 The anti-identitarian identity: Collective identities and social movements**

My departure point for this dissertation was the empirical observation of the gradual establishment of queer festivals across Europe. Having been trained in humanities-based queer and third-wave feminist ideas, it was still difficult for me to approach the anti-identitarian queer identity from a sociological perspective. In short, queer identity is synthesized in the phrase: 'beyond identities'. Although this discursive formation of moving beyond identities seems to be adequately scrutinized in queer theory and humanities, the lack of empirical understanding of queer as a social and political identity has constituted until now a fundamental barrier to sociological explorations in queer studies (Seidman, 1996). I thus developed a curiosity to analyse the ideological frames of queer festivals from a sociological perspective, to see their degrees of distinction from queer theory, and to answer the question of why queer festivals succeed in mobilizing so many actors, many of whom make cross-border journeys in order to attend them. Consequently, I turned my attention to the ideas on 'collective identities', as they are

debated within social movement studies. Moving beyond rational-choice explanations of collective identities, I opted for more relational-structural approaches. A significant number of scholars have been developing such approaches in social movement studies. In addition, many scholars have been acknowledging the influence of 'queer' on the paradigm shift of collective identities.

In fact, many social movement scholars have broadened their attention to the anti-identitarian turn of collective identities, and this has been attributed to the 'queer turn' of social sciences (Jasper and McGarry, forthcoming; Flesher-Fominaya, forthcoming). Jasper and McGarry, in particular, claim in their last book:

'Scholars and activists today – influenced by queer studies – may feel that they are the first to be uncomfortable with strong collective identities, but that is probably because scholarly portrayals of the past exaggerate the homogeneity of groups and identities' (forthcoming: 14)

Strong, solid collective identities, based on the 'identity politics' model, have been challenged both in the academic and the political arena. This shift has occurred because of the emergence of a rival paradigm of 'multiple, tolerant identities', supported massively by the alterglobalization movement of the early 2000s. (Della Porta, 2005b). This paradigm came to be complemented by the anti-identitarian model. As empirical research showed, the queer movement does not monopolize anti-identitarian identities. The autonomous movements in the anarchist scenes of Europe promote this anti-identitarian ethos too (Flesher-Fominaya, forthcoming).

My research demonstrated the persistence of the anti-identity narrative within contemporary queer communities and the festivals they organize. The continuity of this narrative is confirmed, as well as its connection to the historical legacy of the queer movement, together with the theoretical legacy of queer theory, as they both emerged in the USA during the late 80s, later diffused to Europe. Instead of approaching this anti-identity narrative as a result of rational-strategic choices of the organizers, I explored it

on a basis of performative approaches to identity. To be more specific, borrowing tools from queer studies, I saw this anti-identitarian identity as a result of a performative conjunction of a set of practices which reiterate a specific ethos. This ethos is reflected mainly through the organization of the events, and the way certain discursive and other cultural suggestions are promoted rather than others. In the end, it is the reiterative accumulation of these practices which performatively constructs the anti-identitarian identity of the festivals.

### 8.2.2 Sociology of Practice and Social Movements

The main approach of this research consisted in the systematization and analysis of collective practices, as crucial parameters for the building of queer festivals. Based upon Bourdieu's theories on practice and habitus, I explored how activists materialize/put in motion a set of specific collective practices, which set up the festivals as spaces in which counterpublics emerge. I demonstrated that all practice operates with the help of ideological schemata, which contribute to the organization of sites and activities, according to certain principles. Thus, the organization of the festivals in squats and the horizontal character that this fact entails, is an illustrative example of the way norms and principles help structure queer festivals. For the setting in motion of these practices, habitus is the practical operator, 'the principle that generates the 'regular improvisation' that Bourdieu terms social practice' (Krais, 2006: 121). Through activists' and participants' habitus, collective action is integrated into forms of social practice, and this keeps alive the continuation of the queer festival as a counterpublic institution, with its own norms, and its own codes: a field of collective action in which different agents take positions and interact.

It became obvious however that the conceptualization and implementation of these practices is far from being consensual, as several examples showed. Oppositions within the spaces reveal the degree of clashes between actors, each of them embodying her own habitus. I attributed these oppositions, regarding the difference in actors' interpretations

within the festivals, to their different habitus, taking into consideration that habitus accounts ‘for the fluid, open-ended and incomplete nature of social action’ (Krais, 2006: 129). Following Bourdieu’s line of thought, however, I did not see these oppositions as part of a rational-choice debate among actors. The educational and political socialization of each participant accounts largely for his position in the field of a festival, as clearly became obvious with the example of queer vocabulary, its use varying according to each actor’s educational background. Thus, social practice does not start from zero, but is rather built through interactions of individuals, with delimited, yet dynamic, horizons of possibilities.

Social practice and habitus are part of the whole debate about bringing back the ‘bodily nature of human action’ to sociology (Krais, 2006: 126), after the social sciences’ ‘extraordinary resistance’ to it (idem: 128). Participants in the queer festivals are agents who act, think and create schemata of interpretations. These schemata are certainly constrained by their habitus; they allow however for new explorations of the political. If we see the habitus as ‘the socially made body’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127), then the idea of collective practices which use the body as a medium starts to make more sense. The Slutwalk in Rome is a relevant example. By using their bodies at the forefront, participants in the demonstration exposed the limits of gender binarism, and parodied the performativity of gender. We can disregard the theories about great individual and heroic figures; it is collective action enacted by social movements that is seen to be the only way for social transformation. The study of practices and agents’ habitus can bring us closer to the nature of collective transformation.

### 8.2.3 Anti-identity narrative and identity-work

The most significant finding was the continuity of the legacy of the queer movement, developed in the 90s, in contemporary queer festivals. It is sustained through the links between queer festivals and queer theory, links which are mostly enacted by activists who

have studied gender and queer studies. This discursive legacy is based on the post-structuralist critique of identity and identity politics. At the practical level, this anti-identitarian critique translates into an open call for people to identify with any form of gender and sexual orientation, attempting to create a space of radical inclusivity. The discursive strategy builds on the idea of including people subject to various forms of discrimination, economic, linguistic and regarding disability, while queer festivals demonstrate a particular sensitivity for migration and race issues. Moreover, I showed that this legacy is continued through a celebration of *abnormality*, and how queer identity is imagined as a deviation from the mainstream, thus linking queerness to an alternative lifestyle. This idea is shared by both academics and non-academics. Radical inclusivity does not imply however a quantitative enlargement of festivals' publics. Radical inclusivity itself is bound to various forms of boundary demarcation. Through the promotion of specific cultural codes, the number of potential attendees in the events becomes automatically restricted.

Performance and theatricality constitute other basic components of the attempt to build a queer collective identity. Based on the legacy of older queer and gay politics, but also on the performative character of the alterglobalization movement, queer festivals utilize a performative repertoire of action when they engage in public demonstrations, such as the SlutWalk. In addition, organized or spontaneous performances are an essential part of the agenda of a queer festival. Finally, I also demonstrated how queer festivals make attempts to cross-fertilize their own discourses with those of parallel social movements. The gradual introduction of the anti-capitalist politics of the commons is an illustrative example of how queers imagine themselves into the field of far-left scenes in Europe. Gradual as it is, the introduction of anti-capitalist critiques seems to be at an *embryonic phase*. These kinds of links between sexuality, gender and capitalism are not yet thoroughly elaborated, and they have not yet become a fundamental point of reference for participants.

Based however on this embryonic emergence of anti-capitalist critiques, I believe that the dissertation could be the starting point for posing the question ‘how can we *queerize* the commons?’ Silvia Federici in her feminist analysis of the ‘commons’ contends that:

‘The first lesson we can gain from these struggles is that the ‘commoning’ of the material means of reproduction is the primary mechanism by which a collective interest and mutual bonds are created. It is also the first line of resistance to a life of enslavement and the condition for the construction of autonomous spaces undermining from within the hold that capitalism has on our lives’ (2011: 6)

The achievement of ‘commoning’, of creating communal forms of economy, which move beyond the rigid frames of contemporary capitalist modes of production, is essential for the construction of autonomy. Autonomy in this sense, and within a feminist framework, includes sexual and gender autonomy: an overcoming of gender and sexual binaries, which are continually reproduced through capitalism. Furthermore, autonomy can become a mode of producing new kinds of affinities and socialities, which move beyond the normalized categories of friendship/love/family (Warner, 2000: 171). Looking at queer festivals as arenas capable of producing ‘commons’ teaches us a lot about ‘new bodies, new intimacies, and new citizenships’ (Warner, 2005: 62). In the end, the acknowledgement of festivals as spaces which bear the potentiality of producing ‘commons’ is necessary. This normative assumption aligns with Fraser’s idea that counterpublics suggest ‘a widening of discursive contestation’ (1992: 124). Therefore, the extension of the political and the subsequent creation of new forms of citizenship can be seen as essential for democracy: ‘the proliferation of subaltern counterpublics could be a step toward greater democracy’ (della Porta and Rucht 2013: 9).

Queering the commons could be a project which reveals new dynamics in the field, not only of sexual politics, but also of the Left in general. By creating spaces where ‘knowledge and resources are shared freely’ (Brown, 2012: 1070), queer festivals could contribute to the wider discussion of commoning the Left, by making their prefigurative visions a political practice which takes place in concrete spaces, and on a regular basis.

This is what Tasso refers to when he claims that ‘One of the big success [in the SlutWalk] was to have my comrades from the Teatro, take part in it, and *queering* the bodies, their identities’<sup>140</sup>. The *queerization* of a squat, an a priori heterosexual space, becomes an important issue for a movement which sets itself beyond strict identity politics. Queering the commons would not signify isolation from the rest of society, or from other progressive social movements. It would rather become part of the broader social struggle, and contribute to the deepening of the radicalization process of social movement politics. Hardt and Negri contend that ‘queer politics may be...the most clearly revolutionary form of identity politics since...it links identity politics inextricably to a critique of identity’ (2009: 335). Therefore, by queering the commons, the two stabilized sexual identities of homosexuality and heterosexuality could break into a myriad of sexual potentialities, where ‘we would see that the universe of sexual desires is filled with innumerable differences’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 338). Political experiments, such as mixed sex parties, provide the basis for a reflection on these issues.

#### 8.2.4 Transnational counterpublics

One of the biggest challenges of the dissertation was to locate the transnational character of queer festivals in the literature. Social movement scholars have produced a significantly large literature on the topic. They tend however to concentrate their attention on social movements acting within the international institutional arena: for instance, movements whose clear opponent is another state or an international organization. Della Porta and Tarrow’s definition is an illustrative example. According to the authors, transnational collective actions are ‘coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states, or international institutions’ (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005: 2-3). This trend has influenced the literature on gender and sexual politics too. Research has been steadily growing on issues of the Europeanization of sexual politics and gender equality.

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<sup>140</sup> Final Assembly, Rome, April 2014



Scholars working on cultural forms of contention have been starting to explore the transnational dynamics of these movements too. The alterglobalization movement has been an inspiration for this shift. Scholars working on more ‘marginal’ or horizontally networked forms of opposition have identified that these movements can equally adopt a transnational character, although their opponent is not clearly distinct and their ‘claims’ do not necessarily attack the state or other international bureaucratic institutions (Alvarez, 1997; Escobar, 2001; Juris, 2008; Olesen, 2005). These movements should rather be viewed as arenas where ‘new cultural and political meanings are produced, dissent is made possible, and direct action can be imagined (Alvarez, 1997: 108). In other words, networks such as No Border or PGA bore the possibility of constructing ‘transnational counterpublics’ (Juris, 2008: 203) or even ‘transnational public spheres’ (Fraser 2005; 2007)<sup>141</sup>. Although transnational counterpublics are created by activists coming from distant locales, to reach out and create new collective identities, they are not disconnected from their political and geographic specificity. Finally, it is very important to bear in mind that a transnational counterpublic is not a merely discursive construction, which exists before its realization. The network which realizes a counterpublic is created and sustained through specific mechanisms and practices, while it is ‘physically embodied during periodic meetings and events.’ (Juris, 2008: 201)

I opted for the counterpublic approach, since queer festivals, although constituted as transnational, do not target a specific institutional polity. They do not address a single sovereign authority, nor are most seeking to create new ones. Similarly to other transnational movements, such as World Social Forums, queer festivals ‘point to the simultaneous recognition and contestation of the multiple and overlapping sovereignties characteristic of contemporary world order, not simply or primarily a displacement of the national to the global scale’ (Conway and Singh, 2009: 72). This sovereignty of sexual and gender borders is not the characteristic of a single nation-state regime, but rather of a transnational institution which exerts its control over everyone subjected to its

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<sup>141</sup> Reflecting upon the World Social Forum, Fraser describes it as a ‘transnational public sphere...prefiguring the possibility of new institutions of post-Westphalian democratic justice’ (2005: 84-85).

sovereignty. I thus attempted to explore how queer festivals imagine themselves in the transnational political arena, taking into consideration that queer itself represents an idea of moving beyond borders: sexual, gender and others. By describing the practices, I concluded that the festivals are in fact a product of specific physical and digital cross-border practices, which not only construct them as transnational arenas, but also help sustain them over time, through the networks and the social bonds they establish.

#### 8.2.5 Organization and anti-identitarian ethos

At the organizational level, I demonstrated how the siting of the festivals within squats provides their ideological and material frame. To use Marxist terminology, the squatted spaces which host the festivals should be seen as the base upon which the discursive, organizational and cultural practices, or their superstructure, will be constructed. The proclaimed horizontality of the events, embodied through daily assemblies, plenaries, workshops, safe spaces and other similar organizational rituals, are largely linked to the squatting, anti-authoritarian scenes of European capitals. Moreover, the specific way of organization brings us back to the alterglobalization movement and the European social Forums of the early 2000s. The organizational level is the one on which this alterglobalization legacy is the most visible. In summary, the festivals' anti-identitarian narrative is performed through this horizontal ethos, reinforced by the structures of the events, and by specific modes of organization.

The empirical findings on queer festivals' organizational practices reconfirmed the establishment of new forms of 'listening-oriented' consensus that occur when actors meet at the transnational level, as other scholars have shown in their studies on transnational movements in Europe (Doerr, 2009: 243). Actors learn how to be more careful listeners, and at the same time the festivals' mode of organization encourages further deliberative forms of decision-making. Traversed by feminist ideas on communicative democracy, queer festivals continue the legacy of the attentive perspective. Moreover, festivals present another specificity to the extent that they opt for a DIY mode of organizing,

which promotes an even more radical form of engagement and participation, albeit a mode which does not always function as successfully as imagined. Overall, the anti-identitarian idea of queer festivals fits with the paradigm of radical inclusivity, which sets as principal aim to attract people with diversified political, cultural, geographical and social backgrounds. I suggested that festivals' organizational logic follows a more complex pattern of communication than just a simple rational exchange of arguments. Feeling safe during the festivals, with safe spaces, and guidelines on how to respect them, attentive listening and other similar practices reveal the importance of emotional understanding and of *affective deliberation* in queer spaces. These practices shift our understanding of festivals as Habermasian rational spheres, and direct us towards alternative modes of deliberation, in which extra-rational modes of communication create their publics.

#### 8.2.6 Performing cultural battles

Concerning the cultural practices, I showed how specific discursive and extra-verbal practices are promoted, and circulate within the festivals. Starting with the observation on the extended use of *queer vocabulary*, borrowed by queer and gender studies, I showed how people with academic education hold the cultural authority in the events, and become the ideological drivers of the festivals, purely on the basis of their educational and academic training. This advantage in cultural capital is mainly reflected in the terminology used in the workshops, during discussions and plenaries but also in the everyday discussions among participants. The establishment of collective cooking and eating, combined with the promotion of veganism, in most of the festivals, constitutes one of the basic components of the construction of the anti-identitarian identity of these queer events. This tradition, mostly observed in the queer festivals of Northern Europe, is the product of historical and contextual custom, mediated through the squats in which the events take place. Finally, a specific stylization reflected in dressing styles constitutes another extra-verbal part of the building of the queer identity, although dressing is certainly not homogenized and several styles are observed.

### **8.3 The festivals as arenas in which counterpublics emerge**

The analytical distinction of the practices into categories (organizational, cultural, discursive, transnational) was approached through a 'counterpublic' perspective. I argued that all these practices which create queer festivals allow for transnational counterpublics to emerge. I took insight from the growing literature developing on this matter, which is beginning to affect social movement studies too. The departure point is that queer festivals do not link directly either to the state or to the official public sphere. In the former case, they do not address claims against an institutional polity, and in the latter their messages do not find immediate access to the official public sphere, since their political messages are not mediated through rational-critical argumentation. Based on this empirical observation, the study of queer festivals as relating to political opportunity structures and political process theories did not make much sense. I needed to build a framework which would include movements with limited access to the state and the public sphere.

Calhoun's ideas on the links between the plebeian and the bourgeois public spheres in 19<sup>th</sup> century England was an inspiration for my research. In sum, Calhoun argues that 'both bourgeois and plebeian public spheres took shape through the process by which elites excluded popular voices from what had been a less class-structured public sphere'. (2012: 159). The plebeians however built their own spheres, by using, in their 'small gatherings', symbolic modes of communication, such as songs, and specific items of clothing. These extra-rationalistic, non-verbal modes of address affirmed an identity to the plebeian sphere. Therefore, Calhoun brings into discussion the idea of politics as a key contributor at the cultural arena and sheds light on the attempts of these publics to 'form culture in the public sphere' (2012: 162). In addition to this, he sees the plebeians as a counterpublic seeking to 'shape politics itself and not simply rectify social and economic harms, severe as these were' (Calhoun, 2012: 180).

This idea of counterpublic that Calhoun mobilizes has its own history. Starting with an important critique by Nancy Fraser to the Habermasian public sphere (1990), counterpublics became a significant matter of consideration, after the publication of Michael Warner's 'Publics and Counterpublics' (2002). In fact, based on Fraser's critiques against the rational-critical Habermasian framework, Warner adds, in his turn, a critique to her 'subaltern' definitions of counterpublics. In reality, he challenges the idea of a presupposed subordinate position of counterpublics' members, as radically excluded from the official public sphere. He claims that this idea of radical exclusion is not true, since they share connections with the official public sphere, even just in attempts – usually failed- to obtain access to it. Moreover, Warner moves Fraser's subaltern counterpublics framework one step forward by encompassing 'speech genres and modes of address' (2002: 86), that is extra-rational, non-verbal, and corporeal forms of communication, as challengers of Habermas' rationalist dialogical paradigm.

I analysed thus queer festivals as spaces which allow counterpublics to emerge. I argued that queer festivals construct counterpublics to the extent that they are, *at first sight*, isolated from both the state and the official public sphere. They seem isolated from the state because they do not address political claims to institutions. We could say that queer counterpublics fill the space left by the official LGBT movement, whose primary targets are the institutions per se. On the other hand, they also seem isolated from the official public sphere, since their political messages do not reach it directly; it is clear that there are some specific constraints in the communication process. I did not propose, however, to view queer counterpublics as radically marginalized entities, ostracized by the public sphere, and with no form of agency whatsoever. This idea would lead to the conclusion that queer festivals are not 'real' political actors, but rather countercultures. As I demonstrated however in Chapter 7, countercultures presuppose homogenous blocks of resistance against dominant blocks of oppression. Conceiving queer festivals as subcultural producers would be akin to admitting an ideological conflict between queer as a bounded subculture, and the larger society, without taking into account the dynamics of

symbolic appropriation of culture within the festivals (Lizardo and Skiles, 2008: 497), and the symbolic battles which take place inside the arenas.

In addition to this, I demonstrated how the social composition of queer festivals, by middle-class, educated young Europeans, creates a particular dynamic inside the events - a dynamic reflected in the way specific cultural practices are promoted. Furthermore, the idea of their absence from the official public sphere is not totally true. The coverage of the Slutwalk in Rome by the daily *La Repubblica* is an illustrative example of a sort of fragmented access that queer festivals enjoy in the official public sphere, as shaped by commercial media<sup>142</sup>. In addition, the interview accorded by the organizing committee of the Queeristan festival to the Amsterdam-based radio station Redmond, some days before the festival started, illustrates the attempt to give queer counterpublics a brief and precarious, yet real, access to the official public sphere<sup>143</sup>. The links between the counterpublics and the state seem rather more complicated and will be explained in the following section.

#### **8.4 Queer counterpublics, social movements and democracy**

The conception of queer festivals as prefigurative spaces (Leach, 2013), which allow counterpublics to emerge and be sustained across time, allows social movement studies to pay more attention to various forms that constitute the political. By dismissing movements which form counterpublics as a priori marginal, and thus not belonging to the political sphere, is a way of excluding them from the dominant political process paradigm, in which social movements usually place their objects of study. By shedding light on the shaping of these counterpublic, however, we can rethink issues of social movements and democratic participation. Above all, counterpublics are never as marginal as they look at first sight; neither are their members. Therefore, counterpublics always negotiate their own identities in relation to other counterpublics and hegemonic publics.

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<sup>142</sup> <http://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2013/04/06/foto/manifestazione-56090029/1/>

<sup>143</sup> [http://radioredmond.podomatic.com/entry/2013-05-22T11\\_06\\_20-07\\_00](http://radioredmond.podomatic.com/entry/2013-05-22T11_06_20-07_00)

As became obvious throughout the dissertation, relations of queer counterpublics with institutional politics, though precarious, do exist.

The role of queer counterpublics in the extension of the limits of what constitutes the political, and their role in democracy, are ideas in need of further analysis. This conclusion cannot however be silent about how the extension of the political is mediated and organized through social movement activity. The links between counterpublics and social movements need to be scrutinized further, using wider empirical examples, as in most cases, counterpublics will attempt to achieve power vis-a-vis the state through social movements:

‘Such movements take shape in civil society but must “acquire agency in relation to the state,” and seek to change policy by appealing to the broader public. This forces counterpublics to “cede the original hope of transforming not just policy but the space of public life itself”’ (Dolber, 2011: 97-98)

It would be interesting therefore to attempt to trace the future activity of queer festivals, the ways in which they will attempt to extend their coalitions with other social movements which have more direct access to the state, and how these interactions will affect both queer politics, and the more state-oriented movements. Going back to the example of the Queer Committee of the Danish party Red-Green Alliance, presented in Chapter 5, one of its successes was the introduction of transgender rights in the legislative arena. This group did not however manage to move beyond the policy implementation paradigm, and challenge the institutional norms, which create the basis for the rights-claiming process. The question ‘under what conditions do critical counterpublics lose their transformative power?’ will sound crucial in the near future (Dolber, 2011: 98). For the moment, it is important to note that political experiments, such as queer festivals, demonstrate the capacity for alternative public spheres (and the public sphere itself) to be no longer linked inextricably to the nation-state. Queer festivals prove that grassroots democracy does not require culturally and linguistically homogenous settings, but rather ideals, and the motivation to implement them.

Another important aspect to consider in future research is the extent to which queer counterpublics are affected by the broader political-economic transformations of contemporary capitalism. Here, the case of Europe is particularly interesting, since it gives us the space to reconsider the way the financial crisis which has been ravaging the continent for the last six years influences the organization of queer counterpublics at the transnational level. The opening of the Schengen area to new countries from Eastern Europe, combined with the widening of the economic gap between North and South, allows new movements of activists, and prevents others from joining the events. Will queer festivals organized in Eastern Europe have the same claims and structures as in the West? How does the lack of common gay rights policy across the continent affect queer discourses in different countries? I attempted to make a short introduction to this question by addressing the case of the Rome queer festival. The Romans were very skeptical about their Northern counterparts, who see the 'gay rights' issue as an 'old-fashioned' claim. How do differences in gay rights implementation in Europe affect the transnational coalitions?

Moreover, the global uprisings of recent years in the Middle East, North Africa and Latin America have produced significant political changes in the contexts in which they took place. But what about Europe? And queer politics in particular? How could new cross-Mediterranean coalitions lead to a non-Eurocentric queer political discourse? And what would that be like?

My research is an initial step towards the analysis of social movements and counterpublics, sexuality and politics, practices and transnationalism. I do not claim to have covered everything. I believe however that widening the scope of political sociology to embrace oppositional counterpublics can lead to the formation of a series of crucial questions for contemporary democracies.



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## APPENDIX 1

Picture 1



*(Photo: London Lesbians and Gay Men Support the Miners)*

Picture 2



Picture 3



Picture 4



# Queer festival

[www.queerfestival.org](http://www.queerfestival.org)



**QUEER - AKTIVISME - FEMINISME - WORKSHOPS - DIY**  
PERFORMANCE - KUNST - FEST - DISKUSSION - FOLKEKØKKEN  
MUSIK - DRAG - FÆLLESMBØDER - FILM - CAFE - CYKLER

**9-15 juli 07 Kigkurren 1-3 KBH**

Picture 5



## **APPENDIX 2. LIST OF LIFE HISTORIES AND RECORDED DISCUSSIONS**

**[NB: All names are changed]**

### **A. Copenhagen, 21-31 July 2011**

C1 Robin, Workshop Organizer, Travelling from Amsterdam (Palestinian)

C2 Vladimir, Travelling from Berlin (French)

C3 Zoe, Member of the organization committee (Polish)

### **B. Berlin, 1-21 August 2011**

B1 Lee, Member of the organization committee (German)

B2 Vella, Member of the organization committee (German)

B3 Stella, Participant living in Berlin (Belgian)

B4 Gem, Participant living in Berlin (Israeli)

### **C. Oslo, 21-28 September 2011**

O1. Giacomo, Member of the organization committee (Italian)

O2. Chris, Participant living in Oslo (American)

O3 Borek, Participant living in Oslo (Norwegian)

### **D. Amsterdam 1, 23-30 May 2012**

A1. Sergio, Workshop Organizer, living in Amsterdam (Turkish)

A2. Tubio, Member of the organization committee (Dutch)

### **E. Rome, 4-7 April 2013**

- R1. Antonio, Member of the organization committee (Italian)
- R2. Rachele, Performer, living in Paris (Italian)
- R3. Casimiro, Member of the organization committee (Italian)
- R4. Anna, Member of the Collective *Ribellule*, co-organizer of the festival (Italian)
- R5. Morgan, Member of the Collective *Ribellule*, co-organizer of the festival (Italian)
- R6. Jenny, Member of the Collective *Ribellule*, co-organizer of the festival (Italian)
- R7. Paola, Member of the Collective *Ribellule*, co-organizer of the festival (Italian)
- R8. Nicola, Member of the Collective *Ribellule*, co-organizer of the festival (Italian)
- R9. Open Assembly
- R10. Final Assembly

F. Amsterdam 2, 30 May-6 June 2013

- A3. Vinci, Member of the organization committee (Dutch)



